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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

FEBRUARY 35¢

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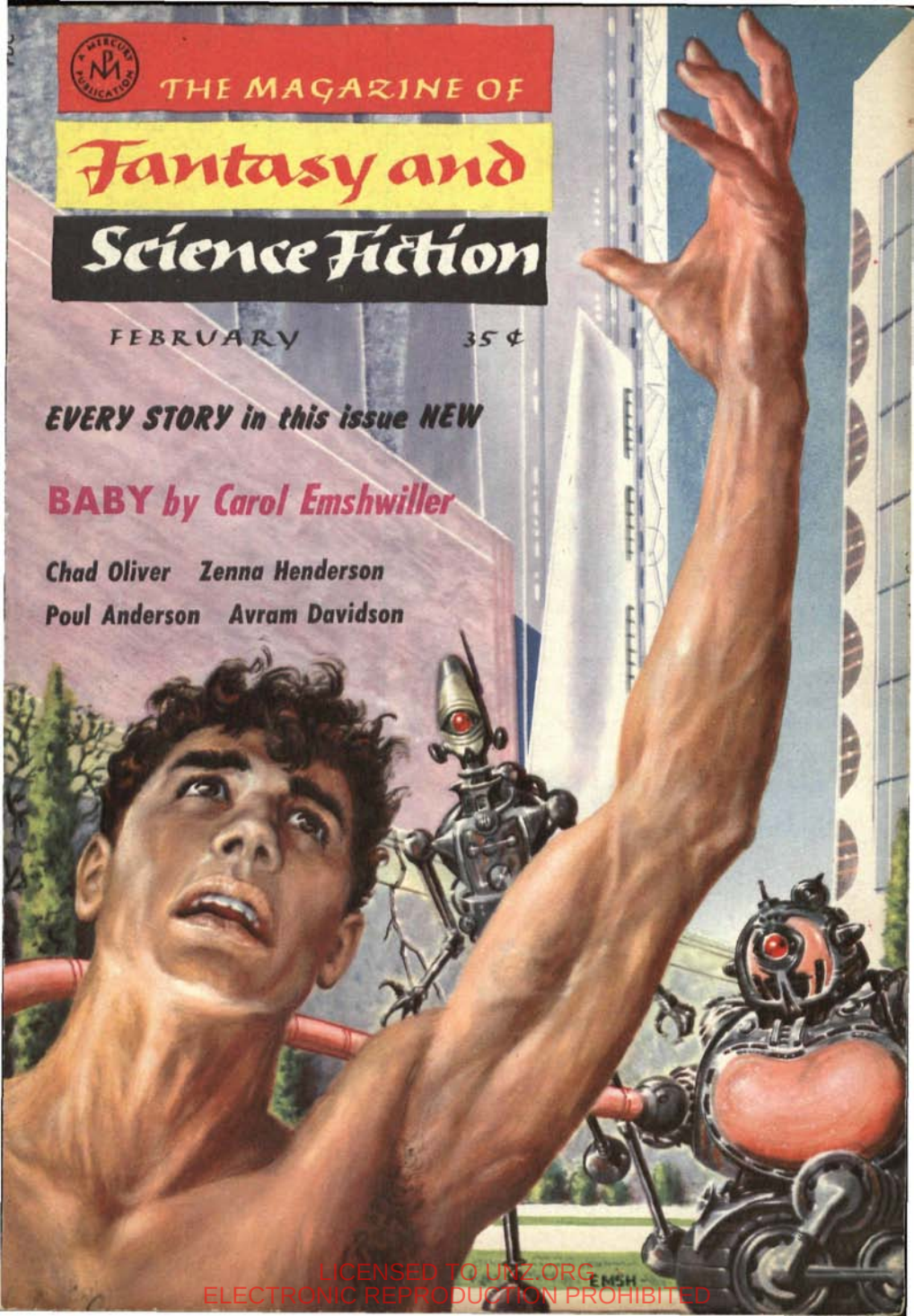

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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 14, No. 2 FEBRUARY

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(*illustrating "Baby"*)

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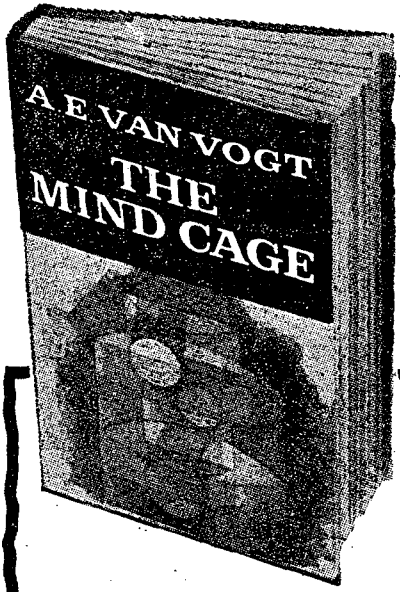

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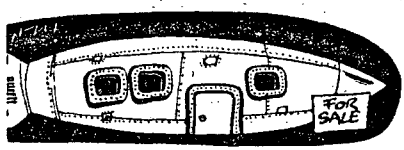

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In which Texas anthropologist Chad Oliver reveals to us the little-known Louisiana-like culture of East Texas . . . and the possibilities for fun-and-games when a Galactic anthropological expedition finds a responsive and resourceful contact among the natives.

Pilgrimage

by CHAD OLIVER

THERE WAS SOMETHING DESPERATELY wrong with Grandpa Erskine and everyone in Pryorville knew it. It was not, of course, the mere fact that Grandpa was a hopeless crackpot; *that* had been obvious for fifty years, and Grandpa's radical eccentricities were as much a part of the Pryorville Way of Life as barbecues, charades, and the girl next door.

This time it was far more alarming.

For one thing, Grandpa was happy. He beamed benevolently at small children and his normally acid remarks had lost much of their sting. For another, Grandpa was actually working despite his firm and loudly proclaimed opinion that industriousness was the one infallible mark of a feeble mind. It was true that no one could quite figure out what Grandpa was doing, but he *was* working. And, most sinister of all, Grandpa had been caught in the act of being enthusiastic about the forthcoming annual Pryorville Pilgrimage. In the light of his candid manifesto that the Pilgrimage represented mankind's closest approach yet to the Ultimate Boredom, this was downright frightening.

Two days before the Pilgrimage all of these symptoms were much in evidence and it was apparent that a crisis was near. Grandpa Erskine woke up at the crack of dawn and did not even bother to take a potshot at the squawking blue jay in the tree outside his window with the air-rifle he kept on hand for that express purpose. He slapped down the hall in his antediluvian slippers, gently cursing the throw-rugs on the slick wood floor, and sailed into the bathroom. He lathered his face and shaved the gleaming pink skin with a straight razor, after which he applied a liberal portion of Wild Stag

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Lotion; since Cousin Bess particularly despised the smell of Wild Stag, saying that it made her bilious, he managed to splatter a good deal of the stuff here and there around the room. He employed two black oval brushes to slick back his rather lank white hair, carefully combed his white chinbeard, and marched back into the hall stark naked.

There were numerous pious slogans hanging in little brown frames on the flowered yellow wallpaper. Grandpa detested them all, but he reserved his most devastating scowl for the one that read: A GOOD WOMAN WITH A GOOD BABY IN A GOOD HOUSE MAKES A GOOD MAN GODLY. About an acre of wall-space was taken up by a rogues' gallery of faded photographs of past members of the Erskine clan with assorted wives and children. A fair number of the men were dressed in Confederate uniforms and fearsome black beards. All the women wore high-necked dresses, unbecoming hair styles, and perpetually stern looks of all-inclusive disapproval. The children were stiff, scared, and scrubbed. Grandma was there too, on the lower right. Grandpa thought she looked a little tired.

Once in his room, Grandpa dressed with a care that almost amounted to fussiness. He pulled on his tight black trousers and looped the suspenders over his soft white shirt. He neatly knotted a black string tie, buttoned up his silk-lined vest, and shrugged into his black frock coat. He sat down on the bed and after considerable heaving and cussing managed to pull on his polished cowboy boots. He topped off the ensemble with a wide-brimmed black hat, admired his reflection in the cracked mirror, and stepped over to the bookcase. He tugged at his beard a moment, considering. He had gotten excellent results in the past with *The Life of the Marquis de Sade* and also with James Joyce's *Ulysses,* but only with the town's few literate people. He reached for Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover,* which was reliable, but then changed his mind and chose a large volume entitled *General Sherman: American Hero.* He chuckled gleefully to himself. General Sherman was surefire.

Grandpa emerged from the room with the book under his arm. He clumped down the winding stairs, pausing on the landing to listen. Yes, he heard the babble of female voices; the ladies were up and about. Grandpa took a deep breath and burst into song as he continued down the stairs, giving quite a spirited rendition of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

The feminine voices ceased abruptly.

Grandpa marched into the living room, removed his hat, and bowed magnificently. "A good morning to you, Cousin Bess," he

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said, "and to you, my *dear* Mrs. Jackson. Where the hell is my breakfast?"

Cousin Bess, a large henlike woman who played the part of a Pioneer Wife in the Pilgrimage, did not bat an eye. Mrs. Jackson, who was on the Steering Committee and built along the general lines of a lead pencil, fluttered her small fan and blushed.

"The coffee is on the stove," Cousin Bess said.

Grandpa sighed. "Is chivalry dead?" he asked. "Has it come to this—that a gentleman must fry his own eggs?"

"You are no gentleman," Cousin Bess said. "I declare."

Grandpa clamped his hat back on his head. "I shall dine at the hotel and air my grievances among the white trash," he announced. "As a Pioneer Wife, my dear, you would be sacrificed to the Indians at the drop of a wagon wheel."

"Well, I declare," said Cousin Bess.

"Well, I declare," echoed Mrs. Jackson.

"I too declare," Grandpa said and stomped outside, slamming the heavy door behind him.

He paused on the large porch, stepped behind one of the white pillars to get out of the breeze, and fired up a good black cigar. He puffed on it contentedly, climbed down the porch steps, and set off toward town.

Grandpa felt fine.

He would have a good breakfast and four cups of coffee and then he could settle down to the day's work.

His only problem was that he was not yet exactly sure where he would steal the television set.

Far above the town, where the blue of the sky gave way before the star-sprinkled blackness of space, the great ship waited. It moved only enough to compensate for the rotation of the Earth. Its mission was almost complete but its scientists were still curious. It was standard practice, of course, to work through a native, and preferably one who was ready and willing to violate his culture's taboos for a suitable reward. But the old codger's choice of payment had been singularly odd. . . .

It would not literally be true to say that Pryorville was alive with preparations for the Pilgrimage, but it could not be denied that the town was definitely less dead than usual. The old Bayou Hotel (built in 1839) was freshly painted and the long iron railing that ran along the balcony gleamed in the morning sun. Every female in town was putting the finishing touches on her more or less authentic plantation costume and the log corral was suffering from its annual influx of horses for the parade. There were antique automobiles parked along the streets and even an old Cones-

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toga wagon drawn up near the bridge outside of town. Confederate flags hung from every other window.

Grandpa marched through all this faded glory, his copy of *General Sherman: American Hero* clutched tightly under his arm. His lilting voice preceded him down the street and the strange words of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" blistered the spring air like a blasphemy. It was not that Grandpa had any use for Yankees; he was not as odd as all that. It was simply that he liked to annoy people. The town's smugness and hypocrisy got under his hide. He sang the Yankee song for the same reason that he contrived to weave a little when he walked. Pryorville was dry as a bone—not even beer could be sold in the county—and a man had to look a trifle tipsy to maintain his self-respect.

And there *was* an unholy light in his eyes, a light of anticipation. It made everybody nervous.

Grandpa encountered the mayor, who was all dressed up in his cowboy suit and six-shooter. The mayor tried to ignore him, but Grandpa was a hard man to ignore. Grandpa managed to get in a few digs about shady oil operations before the man could get away. He then cornered Mrs. Audrey Busby in front of the hotel. Mrs. Busby was already decked out in her squaw-boots and Navaho jewelry.

"Ah, Mrs. Busby," Grandpa said, bowing low. "How is the vacuum cleaner working out in the old wigwam?"

Mrs. Busby pursed her thin lips. "You ought not to make fun of the Red Man," she said.

"I wasn't," he assured her.

"We could all learn a great deal from the Noble Savage," Mrs. Busby informed him. "He knew how to live in harmony with Nature. He was an unspoiled child of the wilderness. He lived in freedom with the creatures of the woodlands."

"The only good Indian," Grandpa told her coldly, "is a dead Indian."

While Mrs. Busby dug into her bag of Indian lore to find a suitable retort, Grandpa stamped into the hotel dining room and was delighted to spot Allan Garner breakfasting alone at a small table under a large chandelier. Allan was a local attorney and the town's leading advocate of States' Rights. He had been known to cry when "Dixie" was played.

"Mind if I join you?" Grandpa asked, sitting down.

Allan eyed the book which Grandpa plopped on the table without visible enthusiasm.

Grandpa enjoyed a splendid breakfast of ham, eggs, biscuits, and hominy, in the course of which he touched on many topics. He pointed out the superiority of General Grant to General Lee and discussed at length the role of the

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Supreme Court in American society.

"Say what you will, sir," Allan Garner said, "plantation life Before the War was a gracious and dignified way of life. Now, mind you, I don't hold with slavery in any form—"

"You just want free labor so you can sip your mint juleps in peace, hey?"

"I don't drink," Allan Garner said.

"A pity," Grandpa observed. "It is a custom that has been known to change people into human beings."

"One day, sir, you will go too far."

For some reason, that remark sent Grandpa into a paroxysm of laughter. He was still cackling happily to himself after Allan had stormed out of the hotel.

Over his final cup of coffee, Grandpa decided that the ideal place to steal a television set would be his own house. To be sure, the set belonged to Cousin Bess, but that was a minor detail.

He settled his bill and strolled back up to the white house he shared with Cousin Bess. He let himself through the metal gate into the back yard, gazing without affection at the clucking hens in the fenced-off area. There were three self-satisfied cats under the back porch and Grandpa paused to pay his respects. He admired cats; they were an independent lot. The cats would survive, he thought, no matter what happened.

Silently, he opened the screen door of the back porch and stepped inside. As long as Cousin Bess was awake, she was talking—to herself if necessary, although there were almost always kinfolk around. It made the whole thing ridiculously easy. He located Cousin Bess by her voice and calculated that she was in the kitchen making sandwiches with Sister May. Grandpa took off his boots and slipped through the high-ceilinged hall to what had once been the music room. There was still a piano, but the room's focus was now the small TV set. Grandpa unplugged it, hefted the set with a grunt, and hauled it silently to the back porch. He put on his boots again and carried the set to the garage behind the chicken house. He put the set on the floor of his car and covered it with a mouldy feed bag. He climbed into his car—the only Volkswagen in town—and backed into the street.

He gunned the buglike little car along the highway, heading northeast. He was soon outside the limits of Pryorville and three miles beyond town he turned down a side road into the cool piny woods. He drove six miles and then, just before he came to the boat dock on Catfish Bayou, he turned off again down an obscure dirt road that wound through the underbrush to an old shack at the water's edge. The shack had been a

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fishing camp that belonged to Old Man McGee, but since McGee's death it had been unused. Grandpa stopped long enough to unload the TV set on what was left of the pier, then got back in his car and drove on to Perry's Boat Dock. He rented a rowboat from Junior Perry, declined an offer of worms and a cane pole, and rowed out into the bayou, puffing on his cigar. When he rounded the bend and was out of sight, he landed at Old Man McGee's and loaded the pilfered TV set into the boat. Then he set out again.

The air was heavy and rich with the smells of scummy water, fish, and rotting vegetation. He rowed his way between great cypress trees, their gnarled roots twisting like snakes in the black shallow water. The sun was hot on his back but there was enough of a breeze to make things tolerable.

Grandpa rowed for almost an hour, cussing steadily, and finally arrived at one of the dreary little islands that dotted the bayou when the water was low. He tied the boat to a stump, heaved the TV set to his shoulder, and stepped out onto squishy, spongy soil. He followed the faint trail he had made to the center of the island, and placed the TV set on a dry flat rock. He mopped his brow.

It was done. The last payment had been made. He already had his reward, of course, but a bargain was a bargain—and anyhow the ship people controlled the power source.

A day and a half to go now.

He looked up, shading his eyes against the sun. He could see nothing. Since the first contact, the ship had remained invisible, only sending down a small sphere at night to pick up the loot that Grandpa brought to the island.

Well, no matter.

They were there.

Grandpa returned to his rowboat, cast off, and began the long pull back to Perry's Boat Dock.

That night, while a fat yellow moon bathed the piny woods in silver, the spaceship lowered the spherical pickup to the island in Catfish Bayou, retrieved the TV set, and hauled it aboard. The scientists took it apart, studied it, entered its number in a field catalogue, and stored it with the rest of the ethnological specimens from Earth.

The Pilgrimage was still a full day off, but already the ship's officers and men were clustered around the viewers that were trained on the streets of Pryorville far below. The primary function of the viewers was to gather social and cultural data on the natives but the pictures were being watched now with more than scientific enthusiasm. After all, you just didn't run across a native with a twisted mind like Grandpa's very often. . . .

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The day of the Pilgrimage dawned with a polished copper sun beginning its long climb into a cloudless blue sky. It was a pleasant spring day, warm but not hot, and the tourists drove into Pryorville in gratifying numbers. Most of them were from Texas and Louisiana, but there were some from Oklahoma and other nearby states.

Pryorville had an interesting history and the Pilgrimage made the most of it. Before the arrival of the white men, the piny woods country had been the home of the Caddo Indians. Then, because of its position on the Catfish Bayou, Pryorville had become an important steamboat shipping center. Wagon trains brought in loads of buffalo hides and these were piled on the old stern-wheelers and carried to New Orleans via the Red River. Pryorville had boomed, with graceful Southern mansions and saloons going up in about equal numbers. It even boasted a famous murder case, when a local woman of something less than a spotless reputation, Sapphire Sadie, had been killed by a wealthy Yankee.

Unhappily for Pryorville, the farsighted city fathers had looked upon the new railroad as a passing fad and had refused permission when it wished to extend its service to the Pryorville area. The railroad had gone through Deputy instead, and as a result Pryorville had been left with its steamboats and its memories. It became a town that resolutely faced the past; it died on the vine. Every year in the spring, the antique-filled old houses were opened up to the tourists, a play was put on about Sapphire Sadie, and there was a parade that served as a kind of historical pageant of the romanticized past of Pryorville.

The town lived for the Pilgrimage. In fact, the Pilgrimage *was* an accurate reflection of what Pryorville had become: artificial, prim, bloodless.

And today was the day.

Everyone was in costume.

Sandwiches were piled high at the concessions.

Cousin Bess was putting the finishing touches on the full homespun dress and bonnet of a Pioneer Wife. Her usually sluggish blood raced in her veins. She was a confirmed and vocal admirer of what she often referred to as the pioneer spirit, and she only felt really *alive* once a year at the Pilgrimage.

The mayor was already in the saddle. He rode a splendid bay stallion but the total effect was somewhat marred by the mayor's rotund body and flopping white hat. He was all decked out in his idea of a cowboy suit, which he affected because it gave him a good excuse to pack a gun. He rode happily up and down the street, practicing his chain-lightning draw and firing blank cartridges at all the tourists. His old Colt boomed like

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a cannon and the mayor was in his element. He was firmly convinced that he was a born glacial-eyed gunman.

Mrs. Audrey Busby, her aches and pains forgotten, was not only dressed like an Indian—in her own mind, she *was* an Indian. From squaw-boots to feather headdress, she was a walking museum. Her painted face was frozen into complete immobility. She talked in very short sentences. She looked at the town around her with something like contempt. Not for her the confining houses and crowded streets of the paleface world! No, she was free, free as the wind, and all she wanted was to get back to her wigwam—or was it a wickiup?

Allan Garner, a trim dark-haired figure in his black suit and string tie, was standing in the hotel looking out the window. He was not overly impressed with what he saw. To him, although he had lived there all his life, Pryorville represented the decay of the South. The old way of life had never been the same After the War—he thought of it as the War Between the States, of course. His heart was with the plantation he had never had. He longed for the gracious life, when ladies and gentlemen could sit out on a great white porch beneath the stars and listen to the far-off strumming of the banjos. He viewed the Pilgrimage as a poor substitute for the real thing, but it was better than nothing.

Men, women, and children lined Main Street, waiting.

The parade was due to start at ten o'clock.

At precisely five minutes before ten, Grandpa Erskine slipped into the attic of the house he shared with Cousin Bess. He went directly to a curious machine he had hidden in a packing case. He stroked his white beard, slapped his thigh, and closed a gleaming toggle switch.

In the spaceship far above the streets of Pryorville, the lights dimmed briefly as a mighty surge of power was drained from the atomic plant and directed through the machine in Grandpa Erskine's attic. Almost every man on the ship crowded around the viewers, grinning. This was going to be a parade worth seeing. . . .

At a few minutes after ten, the parade came into view. The tourists and Pryorville citizens lining Main Street gave a hearty cheer. They could hear the music from the Pryorville High School Band. The high-stepping girls in their boots and short satin skirts came first, smiling at the whistles from the crowd.

Then the band marched by.

In the last row, the tuba-players looked a trifle nervous.

Behind the tuba-players came the Indians.

At first, the crowd did not notice

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anything out of the ordinary. They laughed and waved at the Indians. They pointed and gawked. Two boys strained their lungs and gave out with what they fondly imagined to be war-whoops. One gentleman dressed up like a gambler pulled out a small pistol and fired it into the air.

Then the people took a closer look and a sudden silence fell. If there was one thing that an Indian in a parade was *not* supposed to look like, it was a genuine Indian. But these . . .

There were five Indian men. They walked barefoot down the tarred street. They wore simple skin breechclouts and their brown skins were elaborately tattooed. Their black hair had been pulled out, leaving the head bald except for scalp locks. Two of the men carried hardwood war clubs spiked with garfish teeth. Two others carried bows, and the fifth man had a stone-tipped lance and a small oval shield.

Two Indian women followed the men. They were on the stocky side and they wore wrap-around cloth skirts, shell necklaces, and nothing else.

It was obvious that Mrs. Audrey Busby would not appear in public dressed like *that*.

The Indians had a healthy smell about them. They walked down Main Street as if they owned the place. When one of the local women passed out on the sidewalk, one brave fingered his scalping knife thoughtfully but did not break formation.

From the porch of the white house on the corner there came a cackle of satisfied laughter. Grandpa Erskine leaned back in his wicker rocking chair and watched the authentic Pryorville history march by in the parade.

There was a battered, muddy wagon pulled by fly-covered oxen. A woman with a bandana tied over her gray hair cracked a long black whip and cussed the oxen with a skill that brought an appreciative smile to Grandpa's lips. A freckle-faced boy leaned out of the back of the wagon and used Main Street as a heaven-sent latrine. Out in front of the wagon a grizzled man rode along with a very long rifle balanced on his saddle. When a dog ran into the street and barked, the man casually put a slug through its head.

Oh, they were all there: the dirt-caked buffalo hunters staring at the young girls with frank hunger, the cowboys firing bullets into shop windows, the weary red-eyed Confederate soldiers.

And Sapphire Sadie was there, riding in a handsome carriage. In person, she was a far cry from the dainty lady in the white dress who played her part in the play. Sapphire Sadie was all woman, and there was no possible doubt about her profession.

Long before the parade had run

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its course, the audience had vanished. There was a mass exodus of tourists and the Pryorville citizens locked themselves in their houses.

The show went on, however.

Firewater began to flow freely. The Indians set up camp in a vacant lot and the squaws began to cook the dead dog. Sapphire Sadie set up shop in the Bayou Hotel and there were great gusts of ribald laughter from the poker table. The cowboys and the buffalo hunters began a house-to-house canvass looking for Southern belles. There were two excellent gunfights within half an hour, the more fatal of which was conducted with shotguns at twenty paces. The soldiers wandered around wearily, looking for their regiment.

On the porch of the house he no longer shared with Cousin Bess, Grandpa rubbed his hands together gleefully. "Tarnation," he said, fumbling for a cigar. "There'll be a hot time in the old town tonight!"

Grandpa had only one minor regret.

He wished that he could have witnessed the other end of the great time somersault.

The men on the spaceship could witness it, and did. It was a fundamental natural law that matter could be neither created nor destroyed. If certain persons were snatched out of the past by the Selective Temporal Dislocator—Grandpa insisted on calling it a Time Machine—then certain contemporary persons had to be sent back along the time stream to replace them. Great care was taken, of course, to make certain that no modern person was sent into an uncongenial era. It might perhaps cause a small amount of inconvenience to the natives, but Grandpa had earned his reward by his faithful collection of ethnological specimens. The STD would not function after the ship's power source was removed; for those concerned it was going to be a one-way trip. The ship's crew had enjoyed the parade, but the other end of the line was even better. They clustered around the Temporal Viewers with rare enthusiasm. . . .

Cousin Bess came to with a start. The last thing she remembered clearly was dressing in her Pioneer Wife outfit of homespun dress and bonnet for the parade. Then there had been that awful buzzing in her ears—a touch of the sun, likely.

There came a clump of heavy boots on the porch. *Porch?* Where was she? This log cabin—

The door banged open and a dirty man with a fierce black beard swept into the cabin like a hurricane. Cousin Bess had never seen the man before in her life.

"Howdy gal!" he boomed, squinting in the cabin's gloom and swatting her playfully on her Pioneer Wife Posterior. "Whar's chow?"

"Chow?" Cousin Bess echoed.

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The man's face clouded up like a storm. "Yuh mean chow ain't ready? You lookin' for a whuppin', Lucy?"

"Lucy?" queried Cousin Bess, backing against the wall. "I fear there has been some terrible mistake. I declare I just don't know . . ."

"Damnation!" The man slammed his filthy hat down on the floor. He peered at her narrowly. "Why, you ain't Lucy! Has that no-good she-coyote done run off *again?* Whar is she?"

"I'm sure I don't know, sir. My name is Cousin Bess—that's what they call me—and I'm from Pryorville. This Lucy person—"

The man raged through the cabin, peering under the bed and into the closets. He came back and confronted Cousin Bess darkly. "I don't take kindly to your helpin' to rustle off my wife, woman," he said. "Ain't you got no damned sense of *decency?*"

Cousin Bess put her hands on her ample hips. "I assure you I have never even *heard* of this Lucy creature of yours. And you mind your tongue, sir, when you talk to a lady!"

The man cleared his whiskered throat and spat accurately on the dirt floor. He walked up to Cousin Bess and pinched her shoulder thoughtfully, as though sizing up a prize cow. "Lady, huh? Wal, Bess, I ain't never been one to hold a grudge. A swap is a swap, that's what I always say. My name is Amos, Amos Carrico, and I'll be right happy to have you for my woman until Lucy comes back. Gimme a kiss."

Cousin Bess pressed her back into the wall, ignoring the splinters. She covered her face with her hands, blushing. "Now, Amos—"

Amos Carrico let loose a bellow of laughter. "Shy, huh? Well, that's a change! Never you mind, Bess. Lots of time for that sort of thing later. But a man's got to eat, ain't that so? I reckon you're a mite confused yet, so I'll rustle grub. You sidle on out and gut that pig I killed. And we'll need firewood too, I reckon."

"Gut?" Cousin Bess faltered. "Pig?"

Amos put his hamlike hands on his hips and surveyed her curiously. "What's the matter with you, woman? You're actin' plumb strange. Git on out thar afore I take a stick to yuh."

"Stick," said Cousin Bess. She considered fainting but thought better of it—Amos might chop her up for dinner. A horrible certainty was growing in her mind. God knew this was not the sort of life she had imagined for a Pioneer Wife, but she had better watch her step. And Amos wouldn't be a *bad* looking man, once you got rid of those filthy clothes and that ugly beard. . . .

She bowed her head submissively and weaved out the door.

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How did one go about gutting a pig, anyway?

Mrs. Audrey Busby felt like a malted milk.

Every step she took jolted her from stem to stern and her feet were bleeding. She shook her head, feeling as though there were innumerable cobwebs in her brain. Realism in a parade was all very well, but things were obviously getting out of hand. . . .

When she finally managed to focus her eyes, the first thing she saw was a half-naked tattooed Indian riding in front of her on a spotted pony. Riding! And she was walking, eating his dust, and with a pack on her back at that!

"You!" she cried. "You up there!"

The brave pulled up his pony and looked back. His eyes were black as midnight and his face showed the unhappy results of a bout with smallpox. At first, he said nothing. Then he rode back and looked at Mrs. Busby closely. He stared at her for a long minute and then burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?" Mrs. Busby demanded.

The Indian leaned down and fingered her elaborate feather headdress. He gawked at her Navaho jewelry and her tattered squaw-boots. He eyed her white skin suspiciously. He said something to her that was obviously a question, but it was in no language she knew.

"Speak English, you," Mrs. Busby said.

The brave turned up his nose, snorted, and kicked his pony. The horse plodded on, leaving Mrs. Busby in the dust. She looked around, remembering that strange buzzing in her ears. It was a desolate, trackless land that she saw. In the distance she heard the mournful howl of what she hoped was only a coyote.

The Indian was pulling away from her, and he did not look back.

Well! Mrs. Audrey Busby wiped the sweat out of her eyes and began to run to catch up. It just wouldn't *do* to be left out here all alone in this horrible wasteland. She cried a little but brightened visibly when she saw the village.

Of course, the women weren't wearing proper clothing at all, which was going to be awkward. Mrs. Busby giggled slightly. Still, whatever had happened, these *were* Indians.

"Wait for me!" she called, running forward with one hand holding on her feather headdress.

Now, if she could just remember whether one called them wigwams or wickiups. . . .

The man who had once been the mayor of Pryorville suddenly found himself at one end of a long, dusty street. A blazing sun burned down from a cloudless blue sky. False-fronted stores and roaring saloons lined the street.

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Saloons? In Pryorville? By God, they were carrying this Pilgrimage thing too far!

The mayor hitched up his cowboy pants and jammed his big hat down more firmly over his eyes. He felt decidedly odd. Somewhere along the way, he had lost his horse. Fine thing. Had to be expected though, with all the foreign riffraff in town.

Funny. This wasn't Pryorville at all—

At the other end of the street, a dark figure was walking slowly toward him. The figure was bent slightly into an all-too-familiar crouch. He had a gun tied down on his hip.

The mayor stood absolutely still, too terrified to move. His own Colt was in his holster but the mayor had abruptly lost his interest in gunfights. He affixed a wan smile to his face and watched the man coming toward him.

The other man came closer. A tall, skeletal man. A man standing almost six feet tall and he couldn't have weighed over 115 pounds. He was neatly dressed in an expensive felt sombrero and a funereal black suit. He coughed slightly, sounding like death itself. He stopped. His eyes were cold as ice.

"My God," the mayor whispered, "it's Doc Holliday. Aren't you dead?"

"Not yet," Doc said quietly. "How about you?"

"Who, me?" The mayor's hands were trembling violently and he took care to keep them far, far away from the butt of his Colt. "No, I'm not dead. At least, I don't *think* I am."

"Hard to tell sometimes," Doc observed. "Quite a Colt you got there, stranger."

The mayor swallowed hard. "That old thing?" He laughed weakly. "Just carry it for laughs. Just loaded with blanks, you know. With blanks. *Blanks.*"

"Man ought not to pack hardware like that unless he figures on using it."

"True," said the mayor agreeably. "Oh, very true." With infinite caution he loosened his gun belt and let it fall into the dust of the street. "Truer words were never spoken. Perhaps you would—ah—care for a drink, Doc old man?"

"I could use a quart or two," said Doc Holliday. "That's right neighborly of you, stranger. Yes, I definitely feel that I could handle a quart or two."

"So could I," said the mayor.

He followed the thin gunman into the nearest saloon, wondering idly what the political situation was in this town. In any event, it would certainly do no harm to have Doc Holliday on his side. . . .

For one wild moment, after the buzzing in his ears had stopped, Allan Garner thought that he had died and gone to a Dixie Valhalla. There it was, just as he had seen

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it in his dreams: a magnificent white mansion high on a green hill, stately pillars lining a long, cool porch, the sound of birds in the great magnolia trees.

He felt a choking sensation in his chest. He couldn't imagine what had happened, and he didn't care. He knew he was in the Old South —knew it by the sight and sound and feel of it. Dear old Dixie!

He was here; that was all that mattered.

Look away, look away . . .

Ah, a lovely girl moving gracefully across the green lawn. A lovely Southern belle, all crinoline and cotton—

Look away, look away . . .

And listen! The banjos ringing down in the slave quarters, the happy darkies who knew their place singing and laughing, no NAACP to stir them up and make trouble—

Oh, it was heaven!

But it was all so far away, up there on the great green hill. Why was he down here in the valley? A sudden cold sweat broke out on the palms of his hands. He looked down at himself. No, he was still himself, thank God, still Allan Garner, still dressed in the black suit and string tie he had been wearing for the Pilgrimage. But—

He turned around and saw it. An old rotting shack with gaping holes for windows and the boards warping off its sagging sides. A skinny chicken scraping in the hard dirt of the yard. A smell of something rancid from the kitchen.

He knew what it was. You didn't have to draw any pictures for Allan Garner.

It was *his house.*

He began to sob hysterically. Oh, the ignominy of it!

"A sharecropper!" he screamed. "A sharecropper!"

He fell to the earth, whimpering. And somehow he *knew.*

"Grandpa Erskine," he cried, beating his fists into the hard-packed dirt. "Oh, you evil old man. Oh, you traitor to the Cause. . . ."

Meanwhile, the gentleman in question was having a high old time. He was all dressed up in his finest suit, his beard was freshly trimmed and combed, and he reeked of Wild Stag Lotion. He sat jovially at the poker table—it had been a prized antique belonging to Cousin Bess but there was no need to worry about *her* any longer —and raked in the chips.

Grandpa snapped his fingers. "More firewater," he said.

A grinning Indian complied, helping himself to a shot as he did so.

"It's yore deal, Sapphire," drawled a grizzled buffalo hunter, neatly dropping an ash from his cigar on the rug.

Sapphire Sadie adjusted her shawl to let more flesh peek through and shuffled the cards with expert, perfumed fingers.

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Outside, the shooting and the hollering was still going on.

Grandpa was radiant with satisfaction. He felt, somewhat inaccurately, that a lifetime of toil had reaped a truly bountiful harvest.

"Mighty nice little town you got here," a cowboy said, studying his cards. "Mighty neighborly."

"You're dang tootin'," Grandpa beamed. "Oh, we've had our ups and downs, and I'd be the first to admit it. But we're up now, and we're gonna stay up. All we ever needed was a mite of new blood." He fired up a fresh cigar. "Let's have another round of that firewater, Sitting Bull!"

The Indian staggered toward the bottle, singing an obscure but definitely happy song.

The spaceship had completed its mission. Far above the Earth its great jets flamed and the ship flashed back into the darkness that was its home. Behind it, had there been anyone to hear, there lingered the soft warm silver of celestial laughter.

THE BETTER BET

I gaze into my typewriter
  And wonder what to write
For something sciencefictional
  Is in my mind tonight.

To write about romantic love
  Would be a pleasant change,
But slush at fifteen cents a line
  Is far outside my range.

Then which would be the better bet?
  The query on my face
Is answered by my typewriter,
  Which has the key: BACK SPACE!

ANTHONY BRODE

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Bureau of Imaginary Zoology

Back in our early days, the B. of I. Z. was one of F&SF's best-liked special features. Our xenobiologically-minded authors poured in reports on astonishing alien beings; and readers still cherish the memory of such fascinating creatures as Theodore Sturgeon's often-reprinted hurkle. *Now, after a long gap in such reports, Rog Phillips introduces us to the* vegy—*as detailedly studied a non-animal entity as has turned up in s.f. in some time. And you'll be happy to learn that, unlike its predecessors in the B. of I. Z., the vegy will appear again. This story is planned as a sort of (if you will pardon me) opening veg in a whole series of tales of the strange symbiosis of Man and Vegy, many of which you'll be reading here in the future.*

Love Me, Love My —

by ROG PHILLIPS

"CONGRATULATIONS, MY BOY," SIMS said. "You are getting a transfer to tau Ceti III, and I don't mind telling you we have our eye on you as Directorate material, twenty or thirty years from now."

Lin Braquet tried to conceal his dismay. "But I don't want—" he blurted. "I like it here on Venus." He made a belated attempt at psychology. "I want to stay under *you*, Mr. Sims."

The president of Interstellar Chemical (Venus branch) frowned. "See here, Braquet," he said. "You know our setup, our tradition. You're an I.C.-sponsored man. We gave you your education, we brought you here. We've spent a terrific sum of money on you already."

"But why can't I remain here?" Lin said.

"Our men have to keep moving up the ladder, my boy," Sims said heartily. "Others are getting their doctorates, ready to climb. More of them than we really need or want, of course. We have to sponsor forty percent more than we need to allow for deaths and failures. Other companies do the same.

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There is no room here or in any other company for those who won't climb."

"But—" Lin began.

"You know the facts of life as well as I do," Sims said, growing impatient. "You can refuse to take the transfer, of course. If you do you're out. We already have a man slated for your present job. Then what do you do? No company will even consider the failures from another company for career jobs. The only thing that would be open to you is the ranks of unskilled labor. I can't understand why you even hesitate. Do you have a problem?"

"Yes," Lin said weakly.

"What is it?"

"A . . . a girl," Lin said.

Sims laughed. "Well good lord marry her and take her with you. I.C. will pay her fare too, and of course you get the automatic differential in pay. Congratulations again." Sims stopped smiling. "There's more?" he asked.

Lin nodded. "She has a vegy."

"She has a mother and father too, doesn't she?" Sims said. "And maybe brothers and sisters? When a girl marries she leaves all that behind. The facts of life."

"She won't leave her vegy behind," Lin said. "She and Winnie grew up together."

"Bad," Sims said, scowling. "She's an only child? I thought so. Unhealthy to permit a child to cling to a childhood attachment that way. Well, she'll have to give it up. I.C. certainly won't throw twenty thousand galactic dollars away on passage for a vegy."

"I didn't think it would," Lin said hopelessly.

"Especially to tau Ceti III. Good atmosphere there. No vegies needed, though I suppose plenty are there. Take along a seed and grow another. Interesting experience, especially when they get to be two years old and go through the change."

"I'll see if I can convince her," Lin said hopelessly, turning toward the door.

"Do that," Sims said briskly. "And Braquet!"

"Yes?" Lin said, turning back.

"If she won't, put her down as a case of arrested emotional development and forget her. Believe me, it wouldn't be worth it to wreck your life and career for a girl who refuses to give up a vegy."

"Yes sir," Lin said.

The girl in the travel agency came to the counter with a smile. "Yes?" she said.

"I'm going to tau Ceti III," Lin explained. "I was wondering if there's some way I could take a vegy with me?"

"Only by paying full fare plus five hundred galactic dollars a pound freight charges on its pot. I'm sorry. In fact, the star lines discourage vegy travel because it creates a problem in atmosphere

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balance on the ship. Every ship carries a full complement of vegies to balance the human passengers already, trained to be working members of the crew."

"But isn't there *any* way?" Lin said desperately. "I can't raise twenty thousand galactic dollars, and on the easy payment plan it would . . ."

The girl was shaking her head quite firmly. She gave Lin a smile of sympathy and turned to the man standing a few feet down the counter. "Yes?" she said.

Lin hesitated, hating to give up.

"Any word on the starship *Astra*?" The man smiled wolfishly at the girl. He was slightly shorter than Lin, powerfully built, dark hair and complexion.

"I think so," the girl said, turning to a bulletin board. "Yes, it left Earth yesterday on schedule and will berth here in two weeks."

Lin turned away and walked dispiritedly toward the tube to the parking lot. He was unaware that the shrewd eyes of the man followed him, and that the moment he was out of sight the man excused himself and followed.

"It's perfectly simple!" Lin said, his voice dripping infinite patience tried beyond mortal endurance. "On tau Ceti III you won't *need* a vegy. The company will pay passage for me and my wife—*if* I have a wife. But it *won't pay passage* for Winnie. Do you know how much it would cost? Twenty thousand galactic dollars! More than I'll make in two years!"

"It's perfectly simple!" Leah said, matching Lin's tone of infinite patience. "Where I go, Winnie goes—"

"And I'm sick of Winnie," Lin groaned. "Every time I try to kiss you a big yellow eye on the end of a stalk gets in the way." He glared at the only one of the vegy's eyes that was looking at him, and the eye glared back with yellow defiance. Winnie's other three eyes dropped with injured dignity at the ends of their ten-inch-long, pencil-thin stalks.

"If you love me—*as you claim to*—" Leah went on as though she had not been interrupted, "your love will *find* a way."

"If *you* love me," Lin countered, "you'll give up this—this childhood attachment for a vegy and leave Winnie here with your parents."

"Childhood attachment!" Leah shouted, rising to her full five feet one half inches of auburn-haired fury. "Next you'll be saying I'm a case of arrested development!"

"I didn't say that," Lin said stiffly. He took a deep breath and exploded, "Good lord! You'd think I was marrying Winnie!"

"Ha!" Winnie's four bright-blue voice areas vibrated. "You couldn't pollinate a geranium."

Leah blushed and said sternly, "Winnie, don't say things like that."

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A sniffling sound came from Winnie's vibration areas. Three of the eyestalks began to droop, the eyes limpid with devotion to Leah and self-pity, while the fourth eye stared accusingly at Lin.

"Oh, my poor Winnie," Leah said, putting her arms around the four-footed vegy's pear-shaped green torso. Turning her head to Lin she said, "You've made Winnie ill. You should be ashamed!"

"Nuts," Lin said disgustedly. "You don't love me, you only love that . . . that *vegetable*!"

"And you don't love me!" Leah said, beginning to cry. "If you did you'd find some way to take Winnie with us. You're selfish, stupid, impossible, a beast, cruel . . ."

And so, in due time, Lin and Leah were married. But not until Lin had met Gregor Samsen for the second time. . . .

Lin had gone directly from his meeting with Gregor Samsen to Leah's and proudly announced, "I've done it! Winnie is going with us!" To all questions about the details he had said, "Just leave it all to me. There's nothing to worry about."

Winnie had been doubtful, but Leah had been so happy that Winnie's doubts had fallen on deaf ears right up to, and for a short while after the day of the wedding. But at last Winnie got through to Leah, and Leah pinned Lin down.

"It's perfectly simple," Lin said. "I thought there had to be a way, and there is. The ship has its complement of vegies, and Winnie could just walk on board with us and mix with them and never be discovered, except for one thing."

"Sure," Winnie vibrated. "I don't know a thing about ships and the first thing I was told to do I would be found out."

"No," Lin said. "That isn't it. The ship's vegies are branded with the ship emblem."

"Branded?" Winnie ran to her pot and sank down on it, clinging with all four hands to its rim. "I refuse to be branded. I refuse to go. I knew it would be something like this. Leah can get the marriage annulled. It's not too late."

"You won't really be branded," Lin said. "That's where this steward comes in. The minute we get to the stateroom he comes in and paints the ship insignia on you so it looks just like it was burnt on. Actually you wouldn't even need it painted on, except that someone might see you, and even that is unlikely, because you will be hiding in one of the little lifeboats the whole three weeks."

"Hiding!" Winnie buzzed, geysering slightly. Groping for a glycerine-impregnated wiping pad to clean off the sand sludge, the vegy vibrated in bitter tones, "A common stowaway, having to sneak on board, having to hide, being discovered and tossed off the ship

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on some deserted asteroid, while you ride in comfort. How will you sneak my pot into my hiding place? I won't stand for its being packed away somewhere in the ship's hold while I'm lurking in my shame."

"It's not going," Lin said.

"My pot?" Winnie geysered all over again, a few drops splattering the ceiling. "I see what you're up to now, Lin Braquet. You're trying to kill me. You know a vegy always goes to the soil from which it sprouted to sleep."

"Calm down," Lin said. "You know very well your ancestors on Ripley didn't have pots. And there are plenty of traveling vegies that sleep in a different pot house every night. It would cost seventy-five hundred galactic dollars to ship your pot. Besides, it would be a dead giveaway to ship your pot and not have a ticket for you."

"I WILL NOT GIVE UP MY POT!" Winnie screamed so loudly the four blue vibration areas vibrated visibly.

The starship *Astra* materialized out of the driving, ammonia-saturated rain of a typical Venusian storm, its immense bulk wavering from refraction of the rain that washed against the outside surface of the spaceport observation promenade.

Winnie clung to Leah's hand for courage and watched the hulking symbol of Doom slowly settle out on the field, so gigantic that the rain that fell on it cascaded off its rim in a waterfall curtain that hid the underneath parts of the ship.

Then came the nightmare of the Last Mile, slow jostling movement of the mass of intermixed humans and vegies toward the spaceport subways, huddling in the crowded subway trains, being packed into elevators that shot up into the ship, seeing the first ship vegy and glimpsing the ship insignia branded on it, and envying its *belonging* as it went about its business of polishing handrails.

The central lounge was where everyone had to go to present tickets and be directed to staterooms. In the center of the central lounge was a roped-off area where several dozen vegies were playing cards, chess, and reading. Each had the brand on its side.

Every few feet around the roped-off area was a metal stand with a printed form under glass which read:

"The vegy is the only intelligent species of a large family of ambulant vegetable types native to Ripley, the second planet in the Polaris System. Movement is produced by change of pressure inside thousands of microscopically fine spiral fibers resulting in change of spring tension of these fibers, the change in pressure being produced by an ionic current from fine tube networks similar to nerves in animals. The vegy grows from a seed.

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For its first two years its roots remain in the soil while its body and appendages reach full growth. Then, all within a thirty-day period, the lower half of its trunk expands to three times its previous size, and slowly turns inward and upward, drawing the root section with it until all the fine roots are inside the hollow inner cavity. During this change the four lower limbs turn downward so that they can serve as legs.

"A hollow tube an inch in diameter runs from the peak of the vegy down into the root hollow, and the vegy 'feeds' by entering fresh sand, dirt, and water into this tube, forming a thick muddy mixture that fills the root hollow, providing mineral nourishment for the vegetable organism. During the sleep period some of this 'stomach' content is evacuated through the lower opening. On waking, the vegy is 'hungry,' and immediately refills the cavity with fresh soil and water.

"The vegy utilizes light as its primary source of energy, converting carbon dioxide and water into oxygen and sugars through a process of photosynthesis carried on by chlorophine, the green pigment that gives the vegy its distinctive color. The oxygen returns to the atmosphere. The sugars enter into the 'muscular' process, where they are broken down into various alcohols. As a result, the more a vegy moves about, the more carbon dioxide it requires and the more oxygen it releases as a waste product. This ideally makes it man's counterpart in the balanced aquarium life on shipboard and on the many planets whose unsuited atmospheres make a sealed-off existence necessary.

"The vegy generally lives well over forty years, but in the end loses its power of movement due to the deterioration of its 'muscle' fibers into wood fiber. When that happens it is unable to replenish its 'stomach' content, and dies.

"The vegy has forty-eight well defined brain centers but no centralized center similar to the human brain. Notwithstanding this, the vegy is equal to the human in intelligence, creativity, and personality, and is perhaps superior to man in having an integrated consciousness that is unaffected by the destruction of any one of its many 'brains.' It is also superior to man in that whole future populations of vegies can be transported as seeds.

"Reproduction is accomplished by cross-pollination when a vegy is in flower. During cross-pollination two vegies engage in a slow, ritualistic dance, which is always the same and entirely instinctive, and beyond conscious control or interference. This dance is exceedingly beautiful to watch.

"Vegies were first discovered by the Polaris Expedition in A.D. *2348. Less than a century after*

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being discovered, vegies had replaced all other oxygen-conversion devices. For short periods and by exercising strenuously one vegy can supply the oxygen requirements of three humans.

"You will find the book, HISTORY OF THE VEGIES, *in your stateroom microfilm library, as well as over fifty novels written by vegies that are recognized classics."*

Winnie read this with a feeling of pride that only served to accentuate the humiliation of being about to become a stowaway. A few moments later Lin and Leah finished getting their tickets and accommodations straightened out.

Winnie did not like the steward that led them to the stateroom. His pointed chin, sharp prominent nose and narrow head made his face wedge-shaped under his uniform cap. His eyes were narrow-set and knowing.

In the stateroom the steward busied himself until Leah's parents and the family vegies had said their tearful farewells and departed.

Then he said, "I'm Antone Brush. You have the rest of the money? We must work fast!"

A throbbing, pulsing life flowed through the floor and walls of the stateroom, having nothing to do with vibration or sound, for silence blanketed everything and seemed to snatch up every spoken word and smother it. The pulsing life force was more an aura, a living ghost of the immense distances the ship had traveled and would yet travel, the throb of empty airless spaces between stars where there was no up or down, overlaid with the flow of the cosmos in its rush from the infinite gulf of the past to the infinite darkness of the future.

Winnie held still while the steward, Antone Brush, fixed the stencil in place with scotch tape and worked the fast drying pigment through its design.

"I think I am going to die," Winnie groaned.

"Nonsense," Antone said.

"My muscles feel as though they were turning to wood fiber," Winnie said unhappily.

"So you've been reading the bulletin in the lounge," Antone said cheerfully. "I pick up a few diseases myself every time I read the health columns." He winked broadly at Leah and ripped off the stencil, revealing the insignia. He dusted it carefully with a powder puff to dull its glistening newness.

The loudspeaker in the wall said: *"We will be taking off in three minutes. There will be no sensation other than a slight increase in weight as we rise through the atmosphere. If this is your first spaceflight there are tranquilizer pills in your bathroom medicine cabinet. If you become ill press the red button beside the door to the outside corridor and a nurse will come immediately."*

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"Is there time to get off the ship?" Winnie asked.

"Not a chance," Antone said cheerfully. "The hatches are closed."

Leah sniffed loudly, close to tears. Lin took her in his arms. Winnie glared at Lin. Antone smiled cheerfully.

"We'd better get you to the lifeship you'll hide in," Antone said. "In ten minutes they'll be making the rounds to see if everyone's happy, and they'd better not find you here when they come in, Winnie." He opened the stateroom door and looked out. "Hurry!" he hissed.*

The four of them scurried along the low-ceilinged corridor to a hatchway with a red sign over it saying LIFEBOATS. They went through the hatch into another long corridor, and suddenly felt a slight increase in weight. It seemed impossible to believe that they were in a ship that was rising through a violent storm toward outer space.

They came to a wide corridor that curved in the distance. Every hundred and fifty feet was a hatch opening with a number over it. Antone stopped at the one numbered 16, looked both ways to make sure no one was in sight, then hissed, "Inside! Quick!"

They didn't seem to enter a boat. Antone explained this by telling them the lifeboat was encased in its ejection cradle, and that a control stud inside the boat would close it and throw it free from the starship.

He pointed to a double row of ten dirt-filled pots. "In 'Abandon Ship' ten of the ship's vegies come to this boat. You can take your pick, Winnie, or sleep in a different one almost every night."

Winnie groaned.

"Keep out of sight if you hear anyone coming," Antone warned. "You can hide back in the fuel compartments. Don't worry about lack of carbon dioxide. The boat's designed to give good circulation everywhere. If anyone comes in, Winnie, *keep hidden*. Those yellow eyes of yours are iridescent enough to be noticeable in the dark, you know."

"Stay with me, Leah," Winnie moaned, two yellow eyes appealing to her limpidly.

Antone shook his head. "She has to be with her husband or they will start looking for her—at least for the next twenty-four hours."

"You'll be all right, Winnie darling," Leah said uncertainly, letting herself be drawn toward the hatchway by Lin.

Winnie turned one of her remaining eyes on Lin, coldly, and

*Hissing a word which contains no sibilants is a characteristic of the regional dialect of equatorial Proximans. Clearly Mr. Phillips wishes to indicate that Antone Brush came from this region, notorious for its petty criminals; but to judge from the number of non-sibilant phrases regularly hissed in stories by other authors, there seems to be a quite undue proportion of equatorial Proximans among us. —A. B.

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grated, "Cheapskate!" The fourth eye fixed Antone Brush suspiciously, and Winnie vibrated, "And you, Antone Brush, are nothing but a cheap grafter. A crook, that's what you are."

"Winnie!" Leah said reproachfully.

Then Winnie was alone with the deadened silence, the sterile geometric emptiness of the lifeship, and the ten pots, none of them more than just a pot. . . .

"Forget about Winnie and let's go to sleep," Lin groaned.

"Poor Winnie," Leah said in the darkness and the silence. "I—I almost wish I'd never . . ."

Lin said nothing, but was tempted to echo her wish aloud. He opened his eyes and groped in his mind for something to divert Leah's thoughts into restful channels.

"You know," he said brightly, "that was interesting, what I read in the microfilm newspaper while you were taking your bath."

He left the conversational gambit dangling in the darkness, and finally, hesitantly, Leah said, "What was that?"

He shifted over onto his side and raised up on his elbow. "Did you know," he said, "that this ship has twenty million dollars worth of large unset diamonds and sixty millions in galactic currency on board? The diamond shipment is for tau Ceti III, so the local government can issue its own currency. All local currencies are based on the diamond standard, you know, because anything else costs more to transport than its value." Lin warmed up to his subject. "Why, do you know—"

"I'm going to go see how Winnie is," Leah said abruptly. She sat up and put on the bed lamp.

"Winnie's all right!" Lin said crossly. "We can't risk having someone see us go sneaking into that lifeship and asking questions."

"I'm going to see how Winnie is," Leah said firmly. "You can stay here, if you like."

She started to take off her pajamas, glanced at Lin, and with firmly compressed lips collected her clothing and went into the bathroom, closing the door.

Lin stared at the closed door, then, with a deep sigh, got out of bed and dressed. He was waiting when Leah emerged from the bathroom.

Out in the deserted corridor he took her hand. It was cold and unfriendly, but he kept it.

"We must be well out into space by now," he whispered. "Notice how our weight is just about normal? The newspaper said that we are scheduled to go into hyperdrive at nine o'clock. That's about eight hours from now. . . ."

He gave up. Leah's face was etched in lines of worry for Winnie. It was impossible to divert her thoughts.

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They reached the hatchway with the sign LIFEBOATS. Lin looked both ways, then quickly opened it and helped Leah through. When he was through it he peeked back, then suddenly stiffened.

"What is it?" Leah whispered, feeling his tension.

"Shhh," he whispered.

Leah leaned over his shoulder. Down the corridor they had just come she saw a man. A stranger. Even as she saw him he stopped before a door and placed his ear against it. She wasn't sure, but she thought it was the door to their stateroom.

"That man," Lin whispered. "How did he get on board?"

"Who is he?" Leah whispered.

Lin pulled back quickly. Leah had a glimpse of the man straightening and starting toward where they were, before Lin had edged her away. Carefully Lin closed the door. Taking Leah's hand, he hurried swiftly along the corridor. "Hurry!" he hissed.

"Who was he?" Leah asked, hurrying beside him.

Lin was frowning. He said, "Gregor Samsen. He's the one who got in touch with me and fixed things so Winnie could come with us. But I thought . . ."

"What?" Leah said.

"He gave me to understand—not by so many words, of course—that he made his living fixing things up so people could smuggle their vegies on board without having to pay full price. But I assumed he stayed on Venus all the time. And why would he be listening at our door at this time of the night?"

They reached the turn into the lifeship corridor and looked back. The door they had come through was starting to open. Lin jerked Leah and got around the corner quickly.

"He's coming in here!" he said. "We've got to hide."

"Where?" Leah said. "With Winnie?"

"I don't think so. Let's duck in here." It was the hatchway to lifeboat 14.

They crouched back in the gloom. A moment later they saw Gregor Samsen pass. They crept forward and peeked out.

Gregor had paused before the opening to lifeboat 16, and was standing in an attitude of listening. Finally he took cautious steps to the opening and went in, moving very slowly.

He was gone less than a minute, then came out and started toward Lin and Leah. They ducked back, as he passed. Then they peeked out and saw him turn the corner, going back the way he had come.

"OK," Lin whispered. They left their hiding place and went to the number 16 lifeboat.

Leah hurried in, whispering, "Winnie!" She brought up short and Lin almost ran over her.

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Winnie sat on one of the pots, eyestalks drooping and arms straight out from the pear-shaped torso, unmistakably fast asleep.

Lin chuckled. "That's the vegy that couldn't live without its original pot," he said.

Lin and Leah stole back softly the way they had come. In the stateroom once again, Leah started for the bathroom to undress. Lin said, "I'm hungry," and she came back.

They called room service and in a few minutes sandwiches and moka rode out of the service tube onto the wall table.

"I wish I knew what Samsen was doing," Lin said.

"Why didn't you ask him?" Leah said.

"I don't know," Lin said slowly. "The way he listened at our door . . . I wonder if he's outside listening right now?"

"Lin," Leah said. "How much did you pay him and Antone?"

"Fifty galactic dollars each," Lin said.

"Is that all?" Leah frowned at him, puzzled. "How could they make any money at that rate?"

Lin shrugged and said, "That's their business. I would have paid a couple of thousand—all I had to spare. Maybe they smuggle several vegies aboard each trip. Maybe Gregor Samsen has several stewards on each ship working with him."

"But he's on board," Leah pointed out.

"I can't understand that," Lin said.

Leah looked at him and said, "What if Winnie is the only vegy they have stowed away?"

Lin shook his head. "They couldn't make enough for it to be worth while that way." He frowned and added, "Unless . . . But that's absurd."

"Unless what?" Leah said.

"It would only worry you unnecessarily," Lin said. He saw at once he had made a mistake and gave in, knowing what it meant. "OK. Suppose someone wanted to leave this ship for some reason. A lifeboat would be a coffin without a vegy to provide oxygen, but the ship's vegies aren't stationed in the lifeboats and I doubt if one of them could be forced to enter one against its will, even with a gun, because a dozen bullets wouldn't hurt one much and they're strong as a man. But if that someone could be sure of a vegy already being on one particular lifeboat . . ."

Leah jumped up from the table. "That's it!" she said. "Oh my poor Winnie! Lin, we've got to hide Winnie somewhere else. Right now. Where no one can find her."

"Sit down," a voice sounded from the closet doorway.

Lin and Leah turned. Antone Brush was standing in the closet doorway, a gun pointed at them, his lips pulled back from firm

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white teeth in a wedge-shaped smile. He stepped into the room.

"Sit down!" he snarled at Leah. Slowly she returned to her seat.

"We hadn't counted on your suspecting anything," Antone said. "Gregor saw you from the corner of his eye when he went by number fourteen lifeboat, and called me from one of the hall phones so I could hide in here and see how much you suspected."

"Suspected of what?" Lin said.

"You'd find out soon enough," Antone said. "The diamonds. You guessed the reason we wanted a vegy in one of the lifeboats. But if you hadn't known Gregor was on board you would have kept your mouths shut and figured the guy that stole the diamonds just happened to take number sixteen lifeboat. And even if you'd spilled everything, they couldn't prove anything on us except making a little graft smuggling a vegy." His lips pulled back wolfishly. "Now we're going to wait. Only one thing can save you. If Gregor gets caught stealing the diamonds. If that happens we can't use a murder rap. If he gets the diamonds and makes it to the lifeboat with them, the minute he touches the button that throws the lifeboat out into space a general alarm will sound through the ship. And that's the signal for you to get it. Understand? So just sit still."

"Oh, my poor Winnie," Leah moaned, almost fainting.

"How long do we have to wait?" Lin asked.

Antone shrugged. "Maybe half an hour. It has to be soon. The *Astra* goes faster every second. In two more hours it will be too late for Gregor to hope to use the lifeboat's chemical fuel to slow down enough to land at the hideaway. These things have to be timed just right."

"What happens to . . . to Winnie?" Lin asked, his face very white.

"What do you care?" Antone said. "At the hideout we've got a chef that makes good vegy minestrone." He threw back his head and laughed.

And in that moment Lin leaped.

He caught Antone completely by surprise, but in a few seconds he realized he didn't stand a chance. His fingers brushed the gun as Antone jerked it out of reach. Belatedly Lin tried to shift his objective and get in a stunning blow, perhaps to the chin. But the chin wasn't there and he sensed a knee driving at his midsection an instant before pain exploded there and he couldn't breathe.

Then something hot grazed his right cheek. The world spun around him. Blindly he threshed out with his arms, and felt them wrap around something. He held on, knowing that if he lost his hold he would never have another chance at anything.

"You can kill me," he shouted,

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"but leave Winnie alone. Leave Winnie alone! *Leave Winnie alone!*"

"I didn't know you cared, dear," a smug voice sounded.

Lin opened his eyes, startled. An instant before, he had been sinking into a gulf of blackness and screaming.

No, the darkness had been there a long time, but he had just been screaming, *"Leave Winnie alone!"*

And now . . .

He was in a bed. A woman in nurse's uniform was bending over him with a hypodermic syringe, about to plunge it into his bared arm. Next to her was a man who was obviously a doctor. He was in a hospital room.

At the foot of the bed was Leah, her eyes round and large with worry. Beside her was Winnie, three large yellow eyes looking at him, mocking him. It had been Winnie's voice he had heard.

He blushed and snarled, "Shut up and get back in that lifeboat before someone—"

"They already know," Winnie vibrated. *"All* is *Lost!"* There was mockery—and a new tenderness in the vegy's voice.

"Hush, Winnie," Leah said. She came around the bed hesitantly toward Lin. "Are you all right now?" she asked.

"What happened?" Lin said. "Did Gregor get away with the diamonds?"

"Unfortunately, yes," the doctor spoke up. "However, thanks to your vegetable friend here, it will be his undoing. They expect to pick him up shortly, but he will probably already be dead from the lack of that waste product of all vegies, oxygen."

"But you were on that lifeboat asleep!" Lin said, staring at Winnie.

"Asleep?" Winnie said indignantly. "Do you think I could sleep on a strange pot that *easy?"*

"But we saw you!" Lin said.

"I was pretending," Winnie said. "I heard you coming, and I wasn't going to give you the satisfaction of knowing I couldn't sleep."

"Oh," Lin said, suppressing a grin. "And I suppose you saw Gregor peek in on you and instantly knew what was going on."

"Of course," Winnie said. "And I followed you back to your stateroom and stopped that stupid steward from assassinating you."

"Did Winnie really do that?" Lin asked, looking at Leah.

Leah nodded, tears in her eyes, her hands fluttering toward Lin.

"Meanwhile," the doctor said, "the other crook had stolen the shipment of diamonds and was escaping in the lifeboat, thinking that your vegy was hiding on it." He chuckled. "There's an automatic reward system that will pay you Winnie's passage three times over, when this is all straightened out. You have nothing to worry

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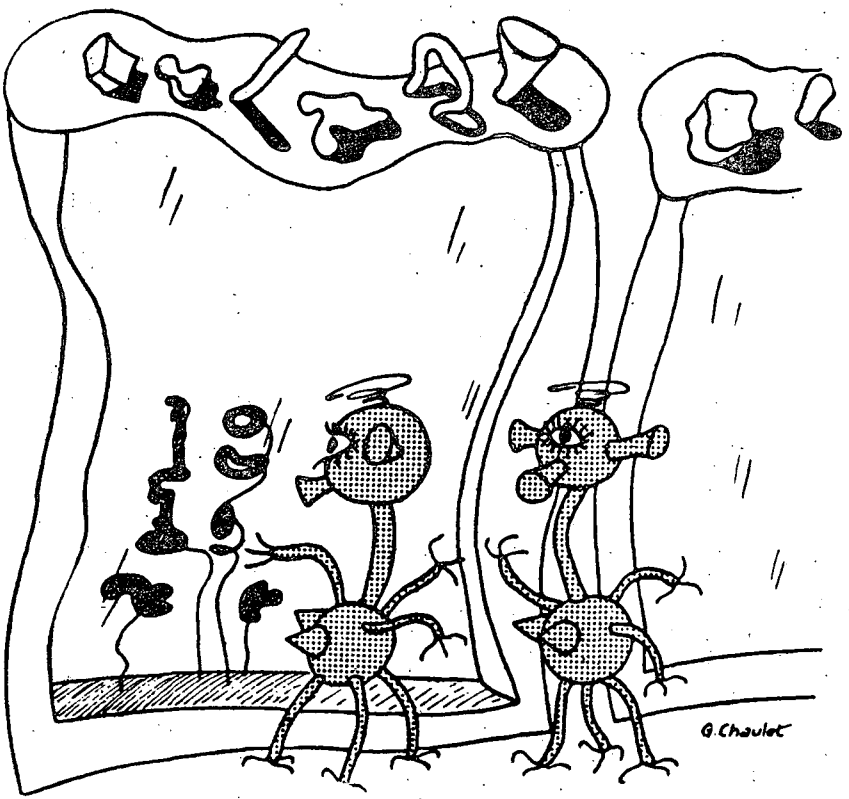
about any more. We've been hearing the whole picture while you were unconscious."

"Him?" Winnie vibrated in a shout. "Who did all the work? Me! That's who." The vegy turned all four eyes on Lin, glaring. "And another thing, *Mister* Braquet, if enough money is left out of the reward after paying my passage, I want my pot shipped on the very next ship, including every grain of dirt in it. Understand?"

Lin glared back at Winnie, then looked up at Leah, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. He reached up and took Leah's hand in his.

Then he said, softly, "Yes, Winnie, I understand."



"Oh dear, they're making the tripzoops shorter this season."

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One way to find a theme for a science fiction story: Take the somewhat unusual trait X, which you yourself possess; imagine that trait extended to the point of dominating a mutation; then, from your knowledge (happy or bitter) of what it is like to be somewhat X-ish, imagine the fate of a man who is all X. Bob Silverberg has an almost freakishly retentive memory; remove that almost, *and you have*

The Man Who Never Forgot

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

HE SAW THE GIRL WAITING IN LINE outside a big Los Angeles movie house, on a mildly foggy Tuesday morning. She was slim and pale, barely five-three, with stringy flaxen hair, and she was alone. He remembered her, of course.

He knew it would be a mistake, but he crossed the street anyway and walked up along the theater line to where she stood.

"Hello," he said.

She turned, stared at him blankly, flicked the tip of her tongue out for an instant over her lips. "I don't believe I—"

"Tom Niles," he said. "Pasadena, New Year's Day, 1955. You sat next to me. Ohio State 20, Southern Cal 7. You don't remember?"

"A football game? But I hardly ever—I mean—I'm sorry, but—"

Someone else in the line moved forward toward him with a tight hard scowl on his face. Niles knew when he was beaten. He smiled apologetically and said, "I'm sorry, miss. I guess I made a mistake. I took you for someone I knew—a Miss Bette Torrance. Excuse me."

And he strode rapidly away. He had not gone more than ten feet when he heard the little surprised gasp and the "But I *am* Bette Torrance!"—but he kept going.

I should know better after twenty-eight years, he thought bitterly. *But I forget the most basic fact—that even though I remember people, they don't necessarily remember me. . . .*

He walked wearily to the corner, turned right, and started down a new street, one whose shops were totally unfamiliar to him and which, therefore, he had never seen

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before. His mind, stimulated to its normal pitch of activity by the incident outside the theater, spewed up a host of tangential memories like the good machine it was:

Jan 1 1955 Rose Bowl Pasadena California Seat G126; warm day, high humidity, arrived in stadium 12:03 P.M., PST. *Came alone. Girl in next seat wearing blue cotton dress, white oxfords, carrying Southern Cal pennant. Talked to her. Name Bette Torrance, senior at Southern Cal, government major. Had a date for the game but he came down with flu symptoms night before, insisted she see game anyway. Seat on other side of her empty. Bought her a hot dog, 20¢ (no mustard)—*

There was more, much more. Niles forced it back down. There was the virtually stenographic report of their conversation all that day:

("... I hope we win. I saw the last Bowl game we won, two years ago ..."

"... Yes, that was nineteen fifty-three. Southern Cal seven, Wisconsin zero ... and two straight wins in nineteen forty-four, forty-five over Washington and Tennessee ..."

"... Gosh, you know a lot about football! What did you do, memorize the record-book?")

And the old memories. The jeering yell of freckled Joe Merritt that warm April day in 1937: *Who are you, Einstein?* And Buddy Call saying acidly on November 8, 1939: *Here comes Tommy Niles, the human adding machine. Get him!* And then the bright stinging pain of a snowball landing just below his left clavicle, the pain that he could summon up as easily as any of the other pain-memories he carried with him. He winced and closed his eyes suddenly, as if struck by the icy pellet here on a Los Angeles street on a foggy Tuesday morning.

They didn't call him the human adding machine any more. Now it was the human tape recorder; the derisive terms had to keep pace with the passing decades. Only Niles himself remained unchanging, The Boy With The Brain Like a Sponge grown up into The Man With The Brain Like a Sponge, still cursed with the same terrible gift.

His data-cluttered mind ached. He saw a diminutive yellow sports-car parked on the far side of the street, recognized it by its make and model and color and license number as the car belonging to Leslie F. Marshall, 26, blond hair, blue eyes, television actor with the following credits—

Wincing, Niles applied the cutoff circuit and blotted out the upwelling data. He had met Marshall once, six months ago, at a party given by a mutual friend—an *erstwhile* mutual friend; Niles found it difficult to keep friends for long. He had spoken with the actor for perhaps ten minutes, and had add-

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ed that much more baggage to his mind.

It was time to move on, Niles decided. He had been in Los Angeles ten months. The burden of accumulated memories was getting too heavy; he was greeting too many people who had long since forgotten him (*curse my John Q. Average build, 5'9", 163 pounds, brownish hair, brownish eyes, no unduly prominent physical features, no distinguishing scars except those inside*). He contemplated returning to San Francisco, and decided against it. He had been there only a year ago; Pasadena, two years ago. The time had come, he realized, for another eastward jaunt.

Back and forth across the face of America goes Thomas Richard Niles, der fliegende Holländer, the Wandering Jew, the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Human Tape Recorder. He smiled at a newsboy who had sold him a copy of the *Examiner* on May 13 past, got the usual blank stare in return, and headed for the nearest bus terminal.

For Niles the long journey had begun on October 11, 1929, in the small Ohio town of Lowry Bridge. He was third of three children, born of seemingly normal parents: Henry Niles (b. 1896), Mary Niles (b. 1899). His older brother and sister had shown no extraordinary manifestations. Tom had.

It began as soon as he was old enough to form words; a neighbor-woman on the front porch peered into the house where he was playing, and remarked to his mother, "Look how *big* he's getting, Mary!"

He was less than a year old. He had replied, in virtually the same tone of voice, *"Look how* big *he's getting, Mary!"* It caused a sensation, even though it was only mimicry, not even speech.

He spent his first twelve years in Lowry Bridge, Ohio. In later years, he often wondered how he had been able to last there so long.

He began school at the age of four, because there was no keeping him back; his classmates were five and six, vastly superior to him in physical coordination, vastly inferior in everything else. He could read. He could even write, after a fashion, though his babyish muscles tired easily from holding the pen. And he could remember.

He remembered everything. He remembered his parents' quarrels and repeated the exact words of them to anyone who cared to listen, until his father whipped him and threatened to kill him if he ever did *that* again. He remembered that, too. He remembered the lies his brother and sister told, and took great pains to set the record straight. He learned eventually not to do that, either. He remembered things people had said, and corrected them when they later deviated from their earlier statements.

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He remembered everything.

He read a textbook once and it stayed with him. When the teacher asked a question based on the day's assignment, Tommy Niles' skinny arm was in the air long before the others had even really assimilated the question. After a while, his teacher made it clear to him that he could *not* answer every question, whether he had the answer first or not; there were twenty other pupils in the class. The other pupils in the class made that abundantly clear to him, after school.

He won the verse-learning contest in Sunday School. Barry Harman had studied for weeks in hopes of winning the catcher's mitt his father had promised him if he finished first—but when it was Tommy Niles' turn to recite, he began with *In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth,* continued through *Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them,* headed on into *Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made,* and presumably would have continued clear through Genesis, Exodus, and on to Joshua if the dazed proctor hadn't shut him up and declared him the winner.

Barry Harman didn't get his glove; Tommy Niles got a black eye instead.

He began to realize he was different. It took time to make the discovery that other people were always forgetting things, and that instead of admiring him for what he could do they hated him for it. It was difficult for a boy of eight, even Tommy Niles, to understand *why* they hated him, but eventually he did find it out, and then he started learning how to hide his gift.

Through his ninth and tenth years he practiced being normal, and almost succeeded; the after-school beatings stopped, and he managed to get a few B's on his report cards at last, instead of straight rows of A. He was growing up; he was learning to pretend. Neighbors heaved sighs of relief, now that that terrible Niles boy was no longer doing all those crazy things.

But inwardly he was the same as ever. And he realized he'd have to leave Lowry Bridge soon.

He knew everyone too well. He would catch them in lies ten times a week, even Mr. Lawrence, the minister, who once turned down an invitation to pay a social call to the Nileses one night, saying, "I really have to get down to work and write my sermon for Sunday," when only three days before Tommy had heard him say to Miss Emery, the church secretary, that he had had a sudden burst of inspiration and had written three sermons all at one sitting, and now he'd have some free time for the rest of the month.

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Even Mr. Lawrence lied, then. And he was the best of them. As for the others . . .

Tommy waited until he was twelve; he was big for his age by then, and figured he could take care of himself. He borrowed twenty dollars from the supposedly secret cashbox in the back of the kitchen cupboard (his mother had mentioned its existence five years before, in Tommy's hearing) and tiptoed out of the house at three in the morning. He caught the night freight for Chillicothe, and was on his way.

There were thirty people on the bus out of Los Angeles. Niles sat alone in the back, by the seat just over the rear wheel. He knew four of the people in the bus by name—but he was confident they had forgotten who he was by now, and so he kept to himself.

It was an awkward business. If you said hello to someone who had forgotten you, they thought you were a troublemaker or a panhandler. And if you passed someone by, thinking he had forgotten you, and he hadn't—well, then you were a snob. Niles swung between both those poles five times a day. He'd see someone, such as that girl Bette Torrance, and get a cold unrecognizing stare; or he'd go by someone else, believing the other person did not remember him but walking rapidly just in case he did, and there would be the angry, "Well! Who the blazes do you think *you* are!" floating after him as he retreated.

Now he sat alone bouncing up and down with each revolution of the wheel, with the one suitcase containing his property thumping constantly against the baggage-rack over his head. That was one advantage of his talent: he could travel light. He didn't need to keep books, once he had read them, and there wasn't much point in amassing belongings of any other sort either; they became over-familiar too soon.

He eyed the road signs. They were well into Nevada by now. The old, wearisome retreat was on.

He could never stay in the same city too long. He had to move on to new territory, to some new place where he had no old memories, where no one knew him, where he knew no one. In the sixteen years since he had left home, he'd covered a lot of ground.

He remembered the jobs he had held.

He had once been a proofreader for a Chicago publishing firm. He did the jobs of two men. The way proofreading usually worked, one man read the copy from the manuscript, the other checked it against the galleys. Niles had a simpler method: he would scan the manuscript once, thereby memorizing it, and then merely check the galley for discrepancies. It brought him $50 a week for a while, before the time came to move along.

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He once held a job as a sideshow freak in a traveling carnie that made a regular Alabama-Mississippi-Georgia circuit. Niles had *really* been low on cash, then. He remembered how he had gotten the job: by buttonholing the carnie boss and demanding a tryout. "Read me anything—anything at all! I can remember it!" The boss had been skeptical, and didn't see any use for such an act anyway, but finally gave in when Niles practically fainted of malnutrition in his office. The boss read him an editorial from a Mississippi county weekly, and when he was through Niles recited it back word-perfect. He got the job, at $15 a week plus meals, and sat in a little booth under a sign that said: THE HUMAN TAPE RECORDER. People read or said things to him, and he repeated them. It was dull work; sometimes the things they said were filthy, and most of the time they couldn't even remember a minute later what they had said to him. He stayed with the show four weeks, and when he left no one missed him much.

The bus rolled on into the fog-bound night.

There had been other jobs: good jobs, bad jobs. None of them had lasted very long. There had been some girls, too, but none of *them* had lasted too long. They had all, even those he tried to conceal it from, found out about his special ability, and soon afterwards they had left. No one could stay with a man who never forgot, who could always dredge yesterday's foibles out of the reservoir that was his mind and hurl them unanswerably into the open. And the man with the perfect memory could never live long among imperfect human beings.

To forgive is to forget, he thought. The memory of old insults and quarrels fades, and a relationship starts anew. But for him there could be no forgetting, and hence little forgiving.

He closed his eyes after a while, and leaned back against the hard leather cushion of his seat. The steady rhythm of the bus lulled him to sleep. In sleep, his mind could rest; he found cease from memory. He never dreamed.

In Salt Lake City he paid his fare, left the bus, suitcase in hand, and set out in the first direction he faced. He had not wanted to go any further east on that bus. His cash reserve was only $63, now, and he had to make it last.

He found a job as a dishwasher in a downtown restaurant, held it long enough to accumulate a hundred dollars, and moved on again, this time hitchhiking to Cheyenne. He stayed there a month and took a night bus to Denver, and when he left Denver it was to go to Wichita.

Wichita to Des Moines, Des Moines to Minneapolis, Minneapolis

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to Milwaukee, then down through Illinois, carefully avoiding Chicago, and on to Indianapolis. It was an old story for him, this traveling. Gloomily he celebrated his twenty-ninth birthday alone in an Indianapolis rooming house on a drizzly October day, and for the purpose of brightening the occasion summoned up his old memories of his fourth birthday party, in 1933 . . . one of the few unalloyedly happy days of his life.

They were all there, all his playmates, and his parents, and his brother Hank looking gravely important at the age of eight, and his sister Marian, and there were candles and favors and punch and cake. Mrs. Heinsohn from next door stopped in and said, "He looks like a regular little man," and his parents beamed at him, and everyone sang and had a good time. And afterwards, when the last game had been played, the last present opened, when the boys and girls had waved goodby and disappeared up the street, the grownups sat around and talked of the new President and the many strange things that were happening in the country, and little Tommy sat in the middle of the floor, listening and recording everything and glowing warmly, because somehow during the whole afternoon no one had said or done anything cruel to him. He was happy that day, and he went to bed still happy.

Niles ran through the party twice, like an old movie he loved well; the print never grew frayed, the registration always remained as clear and sharp as ever. He could taste the sweet tang of the punch, he could relive the warmth of that day when through some accident the others had allowed him a little happiness.

Finally he let the brightness of the party fade, and once again he was in Indianapolis on a gray bleak afternoon, alone in an $8-a-week furnished room.

Happy birthday to me, he thought bitterly. *Happy birthday.*

He stared at the blotchy green wall with the cheap Corot print hung slightly askew. I could have been something special, he brooded, one of the wonders of the world. Instead I'm a skulking freak who lives in dingy third-floor back rooms, and I don't dare let the world know what I can do.

He scooped into his memory and came up with the Toscanini performance of Beethoven's Ninth he had heard in Carnegie Hall once while he was in New York. It was infinitely better than the later performance Toscanini had approved for recording, yet no microphones had taken it down; the blazing performance was as far beyond recapture as a flame five minutes snuffed, except in one man's mind. Niles had it all: the majestic downcrash of the timpani, the resonant perspiring basso bringing forth the great melody of the finale,

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even the french-horn bobble that must have enraged the maestro so, the infuriating cough from the dress circle at the gentlest moment of the adagio, the sharp pinching of Niles's shoes as he leaned forward in his seat . . .

He had it all, in highest fidelity. *There* are *compensations,* he thought. *But oh, the price I pay for my Beethoven!*

He arrived in the small town on a moonless night three months later, a cold, crisp January evening, when the wintry wind swept in from the north, cutting through his thin clothing and making the suitcase an almost impossible burden for his numb, gloveless hand. He had not meant to come to this place, but he had run short of cash in Kentucky, and there had been no helping it. He was on his way to New York, where he could live in anonymity for months unbothered, and where he knew his rudeness would go unnoticed if he happened to snub someone on the street, or if he greeted someone who had forgotten him.

But New York was still hundreds of miles away, and it might have been millions on this January night. He saw a sign: BAR. He forced himself forward toward the sputtering neon; he wasn't ordinarily a drinker, but he needed the warmth of alcohol inside him now, and perhaps the barkeep would need a man to help out, or could at least rent him a room for what little he had in his pockets.

There were five men in the bar when he reached it. They looked like truckdrivers. Niles dropped his valise to the left of the door, rubbed his stiff hands together, exhaled a white cloud. The bartender grinned jovially at him.

"Cold enough for you out there?"

Niles managed a grin. "I wasn't sweating much. Let me have something warming. Double shot of bourbon, maybe."

That would be 90¢. He had $7.34.

He nursed the drink when it came, sipped it slowly, let it roll down his gullet. He thought of the summer he had been stranded for a week in Washington, a solid week of 97° temperature and 97 humidity, and the vivid memory helped to ease away some of the psychological effects of the coldness.

He relaxed; he warmed. Behind him came the penetrating sound of argument.

". . . I tell you Joe Louis beat Schmeling to a pulp the second time! KO'd him in the first round!"

"You're nuts! Louis just barely got him down in a fifteen-round decision, the second bout."

"Seems to me—"

"I'll put money on it. Ten bucks says it was a decision in fifteen, Mac."

Sound of confident chuckles. "I wouldn't want to take your money

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so easy, pal. Everyone knows it was a knockout in one."

"Ten bucks, I said."

Niles turned to see what was happening. Two of the truckdrivers, burly men in dark pea jackets, stood nose-to-nose. Automatically the thought came: *Louis knocked Max Schmeling out in the first round at Yankee Stadium, New York, June 22, 1938.* Niles had never been much of a sports fan, and particularly disliked boxing—but he had once glanced at an almanac page cataloguing Joe Louis' title fights.

He watched detachedly as the bigger of the two truckdrivers angrily slapped a ten-dollar bill down on the bar; the other matched it. Then the first glanced up at the barkeep and said. "OK, Bud. You're a shrewd guy. Who's right about the second Louis-Schmeling fight?"

The barkeep was a blank-faced cipher of a man, middle-aged, balding, with mild empty eyes. He chewed at his lip a moment, shrugged, fidgeted, finally said, "Kinda hard for me to remember. That musta been twenty-five years ago."

Twenty, Niles thought.

"Lessee now," the bartender went on. "Seems to me I remember . . . yeah, sure. It went the full fifteen and the judges gave it to Louis. I seem to remember a big stink being made over it; the papers said Joe should've killed him a lot faster'n that."

A triumphant grin appeared on the bigger driver's face. He deftly pocketed both bills.

The other man grimaced and howled, "Hey! You two fixed this thing up beforehand! I know damn well that Louis KO'd the German in one."

"You heard what the man said. The money's mine."

"No," Niles said suddenly, in a quiet voice that seemed to carry halfway across the bar. *Keep your mouth shut,* he told himself frantically. *This is none of your business. Stay out of it!*

But it was too late.

"What you say?" asked the one who'd dropped the ten-spot.

"I say you're being rooked. Louis won the fight in one round, like you say. June twenty-two, nineteen thirty-eight, Yankee Stadium. The barkeep's thinking of the Arturo Godoy fight. *That* went the full fifteen in nineteen forty."

"There—told you! Gimme back my money!"

But the other driver ignored the cry and turned to face Niles. He was a cold-faced, heavy-set man, and his fists were starting to clench. "Smart man, eh? Boxing expert?"

"I just didn't want to see anybody get cheated," Niles said stubbornly. He knew what was coming now. The truckdriver was weaving drunkenly toward him; the barkeep was yelling, the other patrons backing away.

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The first punch caught Niles in the ribs; he grunted and staggered back, only to be grabbed by the throat and slapped three times. Dimly he heard a voice saying, "Hey, leggo the guy! He didn't mean anything! You want to kill him?"

A volley of blows doubled him up; a knuckle swelled his right eyelid, a fist crashed stunningly into his left shoulder. He spun, wobbled uncertainly, knowing that his mind would permanently record every moment of this agony.

Through half-closed eyes he saw them pulling the enraged driver off him; the man writhed in the grip of three others, aimed a last desperate kick at Niles's stomach and grazed a rib, and finally was subdued.

Niles stood alone in the middle of the floor, forcing himself to stay upright, trying to shake off the sudden pain that drilled through him in a dozen places.

"You all right?" a solicitous voice asked. "Hell, those guys play rough. You oughtn't mix up with them."

"I'm all right," Niles said hollowly. "Just . . . let me . . . catch my breath."

"Here. Sit down. Have a drink. It'll fix you up."

"No," Niles said. *I can't stay here. I have to get moving.* "I'll be all right," he muttered unconvincingly. He picked up his suitcase, wrapped his coat tight about him, and left the bar, step by step by step.

He got fifteen feet before the pain became unbearable. He crumpled suddenly and fell forward on his face in the dark, feeling the iron-hard frozen turf against his cheek, and struggled unsuccessfully to get up. He lay there, remembering all the various pains of his life, the beatings, the cruelty, and when the weight of memory became too much to bear he blanked out.

The bed was warm, the sheets clean and fresh and soft. Niles woke slowly, feeling a temporary sensation of disorientation, and then his infallible memory supplied the data on his blackout in the snow and he realized he was in a hospital.

He tried to open his eyes; one was swollen shut, but he managed to get the other's lids apart. He was in a small hospital room—no shining metropolitan hospital pavilion, but a small county clinic with gingerbread molding on the walls and homey lace curtains, through which afternoon sunlight was entering.

So he had been found and brought to a hospital. That was good. He could easily have died out there in the snow; but someone had stumbled over him and brought him in. That was a novelty, that someone had bothered to help him; the treatment he had received in the bar last night—was

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it last night?—was more typical of the world's attitude toward him. In twenty-nine years he had somehow failed to learn adequate concealment, camouflage, and every day he suffered the consequences. It was so hard for him to remember, he who remembered everything else, that the other people were not like him, and hated him for what he was.

Gingerly he felt his side. There didn't seem to be any broken ribs—just bruises. A day or so of rest and they would probably discharge him and let him move on.

A cheerful voice said, "Oh, you're awake, Mr. Niles. Feeling better now? I'll brew some tea."

He looked up, and felt a sudden sharp pang. She was a nurse—twenty-two, twenty-three, new at the job perhaps, with a flowing tumble of curling blond hair and wide, clear blue eyes. She was smiling, and it seemed to Niles it was not merely a professional smile. "I'm Miss Carroll, your day nurse. Everything OK?"

"Fine," Niles said hesitantly. "Where am I?"

"Central County General Hospital. You were brought in late last night—apparently you'd been beaten up and left by the road out on Route Thirty-Two. It's a lucky thing Mark McKenzie was walking his dog, Mr. Niles." She looked at him gravely. "You remember last night, don't you? I mean . . . the shock . . . amnesia . . ."

Niles chuckled. "That's the last ailment in the world I'd be afraid of," he said. "I'm Thomas Richard Niles and I remember pretty well what happened. How badly am I damaged?"

"Superficial bruises, mild shock and exposure, slight case of frostbite," she summed up. "You'll live. Doctor Hammond'll give you a full checkup a little later, after you've eaten. Let me bring you some tea."

Niles watched the trim figure vanish into the hallway.

She was certainly an attractive girl, he thought, fresh-eyed, alert . . . *alive.*

Old cliché: patient falling for his nurse. But she's not for me, I'm afraid.

Abruptly the door opened and the nurse re-entered, bearing a little enameled tea tray. "You'll never guess! I have a surprise for you, Mr. Niles. A visitor. Your mother."

"My moth—"

"She saw the little notice about you in the county paper. She's waiting outside, and she told me she hasn't seen you in sixteen years. Would you like me to send her in now?"

"I guess so," Niles said, in a dry, feathery voice.

A second time the nurse departed. *My God!* Niles thought. *If I had known I was this close to home—*

I should have stayed out of Ohio altogether.

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The last person he wanted to see was his mother, she who had given him life. He began to tremble under the covers. The oldest and most terrible of his memories came bursting up from the dark compartment of his mind where he thought he had imprisoned it forever. The sudden emergence from warmth into coolness, from darkness to light, the jarring slap of a heavy hand on his buttocks, the searing pain of knowing that his security was ended, that from now on he would be . . . *alive*—

The memory of the agonized birth-shriek sounded in his mind. He could never forget being born. And his mother was, he thought, the one person of all he could never forgive, since she had given him forth into the life he hated. He dreaded the moment when—

"Hello, Tom. It's been a long time."

Sixteen years had faded her, had carved lines in her face and made the cheeks more baggy, the blue eyes less bright, the brown hair a mousy gray. She was smiling. And to his own astonishment Niles was able to smile back.

"Mother."

"I read about it in the paper. It said a man of about thirty was found just outside town with papers bearing the name Thomas R. Niles, and he was taken to Central County General Hospital. So I came over, just to make sure—and it *was* you."

A lie drifted to the surface of his mind, but it was a kind lie, and he said it: "I was on my way back home to see you. Hitchhiking. But I ran into a little trouble en route."

"I'm glad you decided to come back, Tom. It's been so lonely, ever since your father died, and of course Hank was married, and Marian too—it's good to see you again. I thought I never would."

He lay back, perplexed, wondering why the upwelling flood of hatred did not come. He felt only warmth toward her. He was glad to see her.

"How has it been—all these years, Tom? You haven't had it easy. I can see. I see it all over your face."

"It hasn't been easy," he said. "You know why I ran away?"

She nodded. "Because of the way you are. That thing about your mind—never forgetting. I knew. Your grandfather had it too, you know."

"My grandfather—but—"

"You got it from him. I never did tell you, I guess. He didn't get along too well with any of us. He left my mother when I was a little girl and I never knew where he went. So I always knew you'd go away the way he did. Only you came back. Are you married?"

He shook his head.

"Time you got started, then, Tom. You're near thirty."

The room door opened and an

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efficient-looking doctor appeared. "Afraid your time's up, Mrs. Niles. You'll be able to see him again later. I have to check him over, now that he's up."

"Of course, doctor." She smiled at him, then at Niles. "I'll see you later, Tom."

"Sure, mother."

Niles lay back frowning as the doctor poked at him here and there. *I didn't hate her.* A growing wonderment rose in him, and he realized he should have come home long ago. He had changed, inside, without even knowing it.

Running away was the first stage in growing up, and a necessary one. But coming back came later, and that was the mark of maturity. He was back. And suddenly he saw he had been terribly foolish all his bitter adult life.

He had a gift, a great gift, an awesome gift. It had been too big for him until now. Self-pitying, self-tormented, he had refused to allow for the shortcomings of the forgetful people about him, and had paid the price of their hatred. But he couldn't keep running away forever. The time would have to come for him to grow big enough to contain his gift, to learn to live with it instead of moaning in dramatic self-inflicted anguish.

And now was the time. It was long overdue.

His grandfather had had the gift; they had never told him that. So it was genetically transmissible. He could marry, have children, and they too would never forget.

Or did it skip a generation every time? Or was it sex-linked, like hemophilia, with women as carriers? It didn't matter: The mechanics were something to be learned, like the use of it.

What did count was that his gift would not die with him. Others of his kind, less sensitive, less thin-skinned, would come after, and they too would know how to recall a Beethoven symphony or a decade-old wisp of conversation. For the first time since that fourth birthday party he felt a hesitant flicker of happiness. The days of running were ended; he was home again. *If I learn to live with others, maybe they'll be able to live with me.*

He saw the things he yet needed: a wife, a home, children—

"—a couple of days' rest, plenty of hot liquids, and you'll be as good as new, Mr. Niles," the doctor was saying. "Is there anything you'd like me to bring you now?"

"Yes," Niles said. "Just send in the nurse, will you? Miss Carroll, I mean."

The doctor grinned and left. Niles waited expectantly, exulting in his new self. He switched on Act Three of *Die Meistersinger* as a kind of jubilant backdrop music in his mind, and let the warmth sweep up over him. When she entered the room he was smiling, and wondering how to begin.

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Here is a story (outside of the series concerning The People) which differs in two respects from anything Zenna Henderson has previously written for F&SF. Although many of her stories have had an interstellar background, they've all been set right here on Earth; but in this one she moves to a remote star, where a teacher from Earth is engaged by the military authorities very much as Miss Henderson was recently employed by the U. S. forces in France. And this is her first story, here or elsewhere, to present an unsympathetic picture of a teacher . . . and yet a picture, she admits candidly, which is a little *bit true of every teacher when the T.G.I.F. mood sets in. (Which, for the benefit of those outside of the profession, means "Thank God It's Friday!")*

The Last Step

by ZENNA HENDERSON

I DON'T LIKE CHILDREN.

I suppose that's a horrible confession for a teacher to make, but there's nothing in the scheme of things that says you have to love the components of your work to do it well. And that's all children are to me—components of my work. My work is teaching and teaching is my life and I know, especially in a job handling people, that they say it helps to like people, but love never made bricks build a better wall—loving never weeded a garden and liking never made glue stick harder. Children to me are merely items to be handled in the course of earning my living and whether I like them or not has nothing to do with the matter. I loathe children outside of school. I avoid them, and they me. There's no need for school to lap over into other areas of living any more than a carpenter's tools should claim his emotions after he leaves work.

And the pampering and soft handling the children receive—well, I suppose those who indulge in it have their justifications or think they have, but all it accomplishes as far as I can see is to pad their minds against what they have to learn—a kind of bandage before the wound, because educating children is a pushing forcibly of the

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raw materials of intelligence into an artificial mold. Society itself is nothing but a vast artificiality and all a teacher is for is to warp the child into the pattern society dictates. Left alone, he'd be a happy savage for what few brief years he could manage to survive—and I'd be out of a job. At any rate, I believe firmly in making sure each child I handle gets a firm grip on the fundamental tools society demands of him. If I do it bluntly and nakedly, that's my affair. Leave the ruffles and lace edging to others. When I get through with a child he knows what he should know for his level and knows it thoroughly and no love lost on either side. And if he cries when he finds he is to be in my class, he doesn't cry long. Tears are not permitted in my room.

I've been reading back over this. My tense is wrong. I *used to* teach. I *used to* make sure. Because this is the fifth day.

Well, when the inescapable arrives . . . But how was I to know? A person is what he is. He acts as he acts because he acts that way. There's no profit in considering things out of the pattern because there's no armor against deviation. Or has there been a flaw in my philosophy all this time? *Are* there other values I should have considered?

Well, time, even to such an hour as today brings, has to be lived through, so I'm writing this down, letting the seconds be words and the minutes paragraphs. It will make a neat close-quote for the whole situation.

I was in a somewhat worse mood on Monday than I usually was because I had just been through another utterly useless meeting with Major Junius. You'd think, since he is military, that he wouldn't bother himself about such foolishness even if parents did complain.

"Imagination," he said, tapping his fingertips together, "is an invaluable asset. It is, I might say, one of the special blessings bestowed upon mankind. Not an unmixed blessing, however, since by imagination one plagues oneself with baseless worries and fears, but I feel that its importance for the children should not be minimized."

"I don't minimize it," I snapped. "I ignore it. When you hired me to come out here to Argave and paid my space fare to bring me here, you knew my feeling on the matter. I am not without reputation."

"True, true." He patted his fingers together again. "But you are robbing the children of their birthright by denying them such harmless flights of fancy, their fairy tales and such imaginative literature."

"Time for such nonsense later," I said. "While I have them, they will learn to read and write and do the mathematics expected of them

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on this level, but by *my* methods and with *my* materials or I resign."

He puffed and blew and sputtered a little, clearly hating me and toying with the idea of accepting my resignation, but also visualizing the 130 children with only three teachers and Earth a four-month journey away. When I saw that, as usual, he would do nothing decisive, I got up and left.

I went out to my detested ground duty. The children were due to arrive momentarily, dropping in giggling clusters from the helitrans that brought them out to Base from their housing. Their individual helidrops would land them in the play yard and, after unstrapping themselves and stacking the helidrops in the racks, they would swarm all over the grounds and I was supposed to be at least a token of directed supervision, though what child needs to be shown how to waste his time?

The children came helling down —as slang would inevitably have it —and the day began. I usually made my tour of the grounds along the fences that boxed us securely against the Argavian countryside, the sterilites along their bases effectively preventing Argavian flora or fauna from entering. More nonsense. If we want Argave, we shouldn't try to make it a Little Earth. And those of us fool enough to people this out-world military installation should accept whatever Argave has to offer—the bad with the good. It's near enough Earth-type that not many would die.

But to get back to the playground. One corner of it is a sandbox area where the smaller children usually played. That morning, I noticed some of the older boys in that area and went over to see what playground rules they were breaking. As it happened, they weren't breaking any. They were playing near the sandbox, but closer to the fence where Argavian rains had washed out the top soil and, combined with the apparent failure of one of the sterilites, had developed a small rough area complete with tiny Argavian plants—a landscape in miniature. The boys didn't notice me as I stood watching them. They had apparently begun one of those interminable games — nonsense games — where they furnish a running commentary to explain the game to themselves as they go along. There were three boys. I don't know their names because they hadn't been in my class and I never bother with other children. They were older boys, maybe fourth level. They were huddled at one end of the rough area, inspecting a line of tiny metal vehicles such as boys usually have stuffed among the junk in their pockets.

"And this," said the brown-haired one, "has Captain Lewis' family in it. Mrs. Lewis and the three kids and LaVerne, the maid—"

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"What about the new baby?" the redhead asked.

Brown rocked back on his heels and looked at the car, then at Red. "It isn't born yet," he said.

"It might be by then," said Red. "Better mention it or it'll be left out."

"Goes," said Brown. And he half chanted. "This is the car for Mrs. Captain Lewis and the three kids and LaVerne and the new baby—or babies." He looked over at Red without a smile. "It might be twins."

"Goes," said Red. "Now that's all except the teachers."

"There's only one car left," said the blond-haired boy. "A little one."

"You're sure?" asked Brown. "Can't it be a big one?"

"No, it's a little one." Red wasn't looking at anyone. He seemed to be peering through his lashes at nothing . . . or something?

"Goes," said Blond. "Miss Leaven, Mr. Kaprockanze, and Miss Robbin—"

Red glanced quickly over at Blond as his voice dropped.

"And Her," he said.

"Do we *hafta* take Her?" asked Blond. "This would be an awful good time to get rid of Her."

"We can't," said Red. "It's total. Anyway, do good to those who despitefully use you and persecute you and do all manner of evil against you unjustly—"

"Goes," said Blond. "I learned that, too, but you said it wrong."

"Well, we hafta anyway," said Red. "Now. Ready?"

The three boys looked solemnly at one another. Then their eyes closed, their intent faces turned upward and their lips moved silently.

Blond spoke. His voice was shaken with desolation that seemed almost real. "Will there be time?" he choked.

"Yes," said Red. "We'll have five days. If we can Fair-the-coorze by then, we'll make it. Ready?"

Again, that short pause and then Red put his forefinger on the roof of the vehicle that headed the column and nudged it forward slowly over an almost unnoticeable line that was apparently meant for a road. The two other boys began nudging the other vehicles along.

I turned and left them, caught by something in their foolish play: *Miss Leaven, Mr. Kaprockanze and Miss Robbin* . . . I felt a sudden sick twang inside me that I thought I had long outgrown. Such foolishness to be upset by children's nonsense. But the roll call echoed in my head again. *Miss Leaven, Mr. Kaprockanze and Miss Robbin*. My name is Esther Corvin. I must be Her.

As is my invariable practice, at dismissal I left school at school and retired immediately to my quarters. I spent the evening playing bridge in the Quarters Lounge with a number of the other civilian

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employees of the Base and, near midnight, stood in my gown at my window looking out on the Argavian night—which is truly splendid with three colored moons and a sky crowded with tight clusters of brilliant stars.

Quite uncharacteristically, I lingered at the window until I was shivering in the heavily scented Argavian breeze. Then I suddenly found myself leaning far out over the sill, trying to catch a glimpse of the corner of the school yard, madly wondering if those vehicles were toiling minutely forward through the Argavian night. Something must be wrong with me, I thought. And took an anti-vir before I went to bed.

I had no idea that the incident would be prolonged. Consequently I was astonished and mildly annoyed to see the three boys huddled in the corner the next morning. I determinedly stayed away from them, even going so far as to turn one end of a jump rope for some of the girls to divert my attention. My helpfulness was more of a hindrance. The children were so startled by my offer that none of them could jump more than twice without missing. Finally, they stood dumbly looking at each other with red-splotched cheeks, so I relinquished the rope and left them. I drifted over to the corner to see—to find out—well, bluntly, I was irresistibly drawn to the corner.

Blond was knuckling tears out of his eyes. Tears in public? From a boy his age?

"You didn't *hafta*—" he choked.

"Did so," said Red, his face shadowed and unhappy. "It's the coorze, can't you see? Besides, I didn't do it. It just will be—"

The two sat staring at a vehicle that apparently had been smashed under the fall of a plum-sized pebble that had rolled down the side of a miniature ravine. Brown was busy nudging another vehicle very slowly along the precarious rim of the road that edged around the pebble.

"Goes," said Blond. "But they were our best friends—"

"Goes," said Red, blinking and sniffling quickly. Then briskly: "Get the rest of them around there now. We hafta get to The Knoll before night."

I don't know what possessed me then. I almost *ran* to the office and rang the bell five minutes early. "There!" I thought triumphantly as I jabbed the button. "It's night and you didn't get to The Knoll."

I was ashamed of myself all the rest of the day. I pride myself on being a practical, down-to-earth sort of person—and for me to be rocked by such utter nonsense! Actually to feel that I was participating in such foolishness!

That night in Quarters, I tried to analyze the situation. What were the boys doing? Did boys customarily make themselves so much a

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part of their play that they wept over their games? Why did I react so strongly that I was compelled to participate?

I lay in the dark staring up at the ceiling patterned by the glow of the moons and found my pulses insisting *The Knoll, The Knoll, The Knoll.* I probed deep into my memory. What did The Knoll connote to me? But, try as I would, I could make it mean nothing more than a picnic spot we sometimes visited out in the obsidian hills behind the Base. There was a knob of solid volcanic glass there called The Knoll. A small spring spilled the orangy water of Argave into a shallow pool next to the picnic flat. It was reached by a road—Evac 2—that had such a reputation that any bad stretch of highway was (most regrettably) referred to as a knollful road.

Well, it was possible. The boys had probably been on picnics there. Apparently they were borrowing terminology freely.

Next day—the third day—was rainy, rainy with the needle-like, orangy downpour that has been known to draw blood. One glance at the sky told me it was to be an all-day affair. Argavian clouds never blow away. They spend themselves completely in rain. Grimly I put on my raineralls, which cover one from head to foot with even a plastic shield over the face, a curtain effect with the bottom loose for ventilation. I half sloshed, half waded to school. The children were helling in, their bright raineralls splotching the dull brown sky with color. Since they were completely shielded from the dampness by the raineralls, there was no need for them to go indoors if they didn't choose to, which meant that most of them stayed outdoors and I had to be on ground duty, rain or no rain.

I was extremely annoyed—especially since some rain had splashed my face and the loathsome taste of it was on my lips and I had no way to wipe it off until I could take off the raineralls. The children were excited and overstimulated by the weather and ran purposelessly all over the playground. Finally someone organized a game of "Who's your Love?" and raced around, laughing, catching individuals in their circle and chanting: "Who's your lover? Tell his name. If you will not, Shame, shame, shame!" In their mad excitement, they even circled me, chanting and laughing until someone realized whom they had captured. Then they shrieked and ran, scattering like frightened quail, someone's words floating back to me: "Somebody loves Her?"

I was unaccountably stung by the words, however fitting they might be, and turned and sloshed across the playground to the corner. I felt a surge of fury as I saw the three boys bent over their game.

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I stepped closer, wishing furiously that I could topple them over with a well-placed shove of my foot. Why did they never sense my presence? I saw that they were concentrating on ferrying their vehicles across a tiny raging torrent that cut the vestigial road in two, the dirty threads they were using alternately slacking and tightening.

"If we coulda got past there yesterday," said Brown, "it woulda been goes. But that dang bell rang."

"Yes," said Red, his eyes hooded behind the plastic shield. "It musta been the coorze."

Blond nudged the miniature ferry, a rough bundle of twigs and bits of wood, with his finger. One tiny splinter broke away and swept down the torrent. "Maybe it won't last," he said. "Maybe we oughta wait until the rain stops."

"Can't," said Red. "This is the third day. Only got two days to rendezvous." He turned fiercely on Blond. "Unless you want to give up and let everyone die!"

"We could tell ahead," whimpered Blond. "Our Dads—"

"Wouldn't believe us," whispered Red, his eyes shuttering. "They've never faired-the-coorze. How many more to go?"

"Four," said Brown. "And two have been drownded already."

"Anybody get out?" asked Blond.

"Only Buster," whimpered Brown. "I pushed him in with the Scotts."

"*We're* not across yet." Blond's voice shook. "Will we make it?"

"Start across," said Red.

I slopped over to the school building and started a rousing argument in the office that resulted in the bell ringing five minutes late. *There,* I thought. *There's your five minutes back.*

That afternoon as we watched the children helling up to the helitrans through the last of the downpour, Miss Robbins looked past me to Miss Leaven and said, "I can't imagine what happened to Leonard. He cried all day for his mother. Imagine, a boy his age crying for his mother."

"This putrid rain would make anyone cry," said Miss Leaven. "He's a cute kid, isn't he? All those blond curls."

Blond said my feet in the squishy orange mud. *Blond, blond, blond.*

The situation followed me home, a formless, baseless haunting. I caught myself pacing aimlessly and sat down with a book. I read four pages without retaining a a word. I took an anti-vir and an aspirin and started cleaning out my desk drawer. I finally went back to the troublesome cable I was knitting in a sweater and grimly set myself to counting knits and purls. The evening went somehow and I went to sleep in an aura of foreboding.

I was unduly upset when I was awakened by the alert signal some

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time in the very early morning hours. As a civilian there was nothing for me to do during a practice alert except to try to go back to sleep. Actually, if ever a real alert was called and we had to evacuate, there was a plan that was supposed to be put into operation. I don't think any of us civilians and non-combatants had many illusions about what would actually happen under such circumstances. We'd be pointed down a road and told to "git," and we'd be on our own after that. We were expendable.

I lay awake, trying to rid myself of the vision of what a person looked like after an unprotected attack by the enemy. They have a nasty type of projectile that merely pricks the skin. But then the pricked place almost explodes into an orange-sized swelling that, when cut or punctured, which it must be immediately to ease the unendurable agony, sprays out hundreds of tiny creatures that scatter wildly, digging for hiding holes. And their tiny claws prick the skin. And then the pricked places—

I turned over and drowsed fitfully until the all-clear sounded and then, for the first time on Argave, I overslept and arrived at school unfed and feeling that my clothes were flung on, which certainly didn't improve my disposition. It was one of those days that reminded me that sometimes I loathed myself as much as I loathed the children. During ground-duty time I walked briskly around the playground perimeter, feeling caged and trying to work it off. I saw the three boys bent over their interminable game in the corner, but I avoided them, sick to the bone of school and kids and —and myself. I was just holding on until the mood would pass.

But after school I began to wonder about the game and, contrary to my usual practice, I stayed after school. I was all by myself on the empty playground as I squatted in the corner. I looked uncomprehendingly at the scratches, the tiny heaps of gravel, the signs and symbols scrawled on the ground. They meant nothing to me. There was no interpreter to read me the day's journey.

Day's journey? To where? I squatted there, no doubt a grotesque object, with my head between my hands, my arms resting on my knees, and rocked back and forth. Surely my sanity was going. No adult in her right mind would worry over a tiny row of toy vehicles sprawled in the sticky mud of the playground. But I looked again. I finally found the lead vehicle. The whole column had detoured around a large rock and seemed to be helplessly bogged down in the mud. With a quick guilty glance around me, I carefully patted the mud smooth in front of the column, making a tiny safe highway to bring it back around the rock. I started to pick

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up the first vehicle to clear its wheels of the mud. But I couldn't lift it. Incredulous, I tried again. With all my strength I pulled at that tiny toy. It might have been part of the bones of the world. It moved not a fraction of an inch. I felt a fingernail snap and relinquished my hold. I felt fury bubble up inside of me and, grabbing a double handful of mud, I slopped it down on the smooth road I had just made. My breath whistled between my clenched teeth. I felt like hammering the whole thing flat, smashing all the little vehicles out of sight in the muck—hammering, beating, tearing . . . !

I drew a quavering breath and stood up. Adults are not supposed to have tantrums. I held my two muddy hands away from me as I went indoors to wash. I left a muddy thumb print on the door latch as I went in. I wiped it off thoroughly with tissue as I left the building, my mind carefully blank of the whole situation. I couldn't understand or explain it. Hence it should be ignored. On this premise I have built my life. Built it . . . or lost it?

Friday, I paced the playground, trying to forget the far corner. My mind was seething with questions that kept frothing up like bubbles and popping unanswered, even unstated. But this was the fifth day. That's all they had talked about: five days. After this day I could let my bemused mind go back to its usual thoughts. Then, a little bleakly, I tried to remember what I used to think about. I couldn't remember.

A flame of resentment began burning inside me. These—these *brats* had upset my whole life. Logically or illogically I was caught in the web of their nonsense. I was being pried out of my pattern and I didn't like it. Years of training and restraint and denial had gone into making that pattern and those brats were shattering it. They were making me an un-understandable and inexplicable thing—a thing to be ignored. I pressed my lips tightly together, my jaw muscles knotting, my heels gouging the soft turf of the playground as I patrolled. If this foolishness persisted one moment beyond this day, I'd report the three of them to the office for —for perversion. That would rock them good! Them and their families. Let *their* patterns be shattered. Let *their* nasty insides spill out like cracked, rotten eggs!

Sharply I caught myself up, my breath thick in my upper chest. How horrible can one person get? After all, the knife is not responsible for the gash it makes—or the blood that stains it. It's the hand behind the knife—The Hand. I felt a little dizzy at such odd, unaccustomed thoughts crowding into my mind—a billowing, shapeless turmoil.

When I felt I had myself under full control, I started casually for

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the corner. At that moment the bell rang. I saw three heads snap up at the sound and assumed that they were responding. Consequently, when I got to the door and had all the classes lined up to go in and looked over at the corner and saw the three still there, I was justifiably annoyed. I delegated Peter to see that the lines went in in order and stalked out to the three truants. My firm step wavered and softened as I approached the trio. I leaned over them, not caring whether they saw me or not. I opened my mouth to speak, but it stayed open—and silent—as I took in the scene.

Something new had been added. A miniature spacecraft was balanced delicately on its fins on a small flat area. All the toy vehicles were pulled up in a circle around it—all but two: the last ones in the convoy. Red was nudging the next to the last over a flimsy bridge built of matted stems and grass across a miniature chasm that decisively ended the makeshift road. The bridge swayed and sagged. The vehicle slid and rocked and Red wiped the sweat from his forehead when Blond took over and started the vehicle over towards the spacecraft. Red reached his finger out to the last vehicle and made it toil through the dust up to the makeshift bridge. I suddenly became conscious of how absorbed I had become and my anger flared again. I reached out my foot and stepped heavily. I felt the twigs give under my shoe, reluctantly brittle, like living bones. I ground my foot down until the dust scuffed up over the sole. Then I said, "The bell rang."

My voice left no room for argument. After a slight pause, the three boys got up from the ground. Even then they didn't look at me. Brown looked at Red and said, "Tomorrow?"

"No," said Red. "This is the fifth day. There aren't any more days."

"But how will they ever make it—?"

"It's none of our business." Red hunched his shoulders. "We tried. We faired-the-coorze. It's finished."

"But what will they do?" Blond took a weary step, easing his tired knees with his hands.

Red shrugged. "*She* did it. Let Her figure it out."

"But I *like* my teacher," protested Blond.

"Goes," said Red. "But we can't help it. No one falls alone, even if we think they ought to."

"I don't like to play this game," wailed Blond. "I think it stinks!"

"Who's playing!" Red's face crumpled. "Oh, Loving Father, who's playing?"

Brown and Blond put their arms around him and helped him, his face moving blindly, towards the school building.

I looked down at the mess I had made. The last car was poised precariously on the rim of the ruin.

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All the rest around the spacecraft looked like little chicks gathering around a mother hen for warmth and shelter against the night. I snorted at the conceit and, flicking the dust off my shoe with a tissue, went into school.

That was Friday. Saturday a wave of uneasiness swept across the Base. There were restless knots of people gathered in the PX and the Commissary and the Club, chattering the same chatter as usual but with absent, worried looks. Sunday it was evident that many of the key personnel were not around. They had dispersed without a farewell. At two o'clock Monday morning, I found myself groping awake to the alert signal. This time was different. It felt different. It sounded different. I staggered out of bed, groping blindly for my clothes. I struggled with wrong-side-out hooks for interminable minutes before I awoke enough to turn the light on. I scrambled into my raineralls (our evac uniform) and went to the closet for my evac bag which, in the face of ridicule, I had packed when I first arrived—as we were supposed to do. By the time fists were hammering on our doors and loud feet were shaking our corridor and loud voices crying, "This is it! Out! Out! All Civvies out!" I was dressed and ready.

We were two days from Base before I caught on. I hadn't even been clued—except in a vague *déjà vu* way—by the shivering wait in the weird pre-dawn darkness as we were assigned to our cars.

"That's everyone except the teachers."

"There's only a small car left." Mrs. Lewis' face leaned, pale and anxious out of the window. "It'll be crowded. Maybe we could make room for one."

"No," the lieutenant in charge of us said decisively. "You'll need that room, especially if the baby decides to come."

Tears came to Mrs. Lewis' eyes. "Thanks," she said. "Has there been any news?"

"Only that the first skirmish is over. Ninety percent casualties."

"Oh, Loving Father!" Mrs. Lewis whispered to her cupped hands. "All the strong young men."

We were pointed down a road and told to "git," our only tie with the military the reluctant young lieutenant.

"Not on this knollful road!" I heard Miss Leaven wail. Then she laughed. Her laughter tightened into a sob.

Reluctantly that first day, I shared what few eatables I had in my evac kit. We had no lunch stop scheduled. None of the others had a complete kit as they should have had. They would have had their own food if they had complied with the regulations.

Early the morning of the second day, we were startled out of our

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weary stupor by a sudden grinding crash and an abrupt bumper-to-bumper stop. We all got out of the cars and walked stiffly forward along the column. I took one look at the car lying crushed under the huge boulder that had fallen from the wall of the ravine, leaned heavily against the slope of the hill and hid my eyes. I rocked myself achingly in a sudden flood of apprehension. My whole being rebelled against the situation. It was impossible. There could be nothing but wildest coincidence to tie this event to three boys hunched in a corner of a playground. It was all my sick imagination that started to draw parallels. Imagination! That curse!

But we didn't make The Knoll that night. Darkness shut down unexpectedly early after we had edged around the boulder and it left us to creep slowly in the darkness across the splintery obsidian plain, never quite sure we were still on the fragmentary road.

Next morning the orangy rain began jabbing spitefully down and we found ourselves stopped by a vivid torrent that had cut the road in two. By now I was numb and trying to make myself more so. I couldn't watch the building of the makeshift ferry. I couldn't watch the crossings. I covered my ears so I couldn't hear the cries when the two cars were swept away. I blindly thrust my extra sweater out to wrap the limp, dripping Butch in before he was pushed into Scott's car. I didn't tense and gasp as we were ferried across. I knew—I knew . . . There was light long enough to get our—the last—car across and then the almost tangible darkness again.

Later when we stopped to rest, worn out by inching through hub-deep mud, I walked forward around the turn and saw the road stretching smoothly—almost paved-looking—away into the darkness. I waited quietly, until, with a low rumble and a moist sucking splat, mud slid from the hill above and bogged the road completely.

I went back to our car and stood stupidly near it, too disoriented even to sit down. I believe it was Miss Robbin who led me to the door and helped me in. Her face was puffed and splotchy. I remember watching with a detached sort of wonder as a tear slid down her cheek. I wondered dully how it would feel to have a small wet face pushed tight against your throat, and a tousled blond head hugged tight in your arms as a child cried for his mother. No one ever wept in my arms. I have never cried comforted, either. Blond had cried twice for his tragedy, but he had had something he thought worth the tears.

This is noon of the fifth day. We are eating our lunch now. By two o'clock they will have finished the rickety bridge that has been de-

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vised to get us across the last ravine. The dull gleam of the spacecraft is ahead of us. Voices around me are quick with relief and hope. Mrs. Lewis is reassuring Miss Leaven again that the pains will hold off until they can get across. The trek is over. We have rendezvoused. This is the last step. Step?

It's all I can do to keep from looking constantly up at the sky, wincing. If I could break through this stiff pattern of mine, I would urge them to start now! Don't waste any time! Finish the bridge! Start now so there'll be time! Let *us* go first instead of last! Watch out! Watch out! The foot will come plunging down out of the empty sky—

Instead, I sit and stare into my cooling coffee, almost too weary to lift my pencil again.

But how was I to know? A person is what he is. He acts as he acts because he acts that way. Isn't it so? *Isn't it so?*

Oh, Loving Father—

EDITOR'S NOTE:

There's a question that recurs so often in the mail that I might as well answer it once and for all (I hope) in print: No, despite rumors, there is no collected volume of Zenna Henderson's stories of The People. Matter of fact, the series needs one more story to make, both in length and in shape, a satisfactory book. Miss Henderson is at work on that needed story now; and, to judge from the number of requests for the non-existent book that reach this office, there should be stiff bidding among science fiction publishers for the completed volume.

Meanwhile, for readers eager to fill in gaps, here is the complete bibliography to date of the novelets of The People:

Ararat. F&SF, October, 1952.
Everett F. Bleiler & T. E. Dikty, editors. THE BEST S.-F. STORIES: 1953. New York: Fell (1953).
Bleiler & Dikty, editors. FRONTIERS IN SPACE. New York: Bantam (1955).
Wagenheim, Dolkey & Kobler, editors. THIS IS AMERICA. New York: Holt, 1956.
Gilead. F&SF, August, 1954.
Pottage. F&SF, September, 1955.
Anthony Boucher, editor. THE BEST FROM F&SF: FIFTH SERIES. New York: Doubleday, 1956.
Judith Merril, editor. S-F: THE YEAR'S GREATEST. New York: Gnome-Dell (1956).
Wilderness. F&SF, January, 1957.

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Chad Oliver's alien anthropologists, who opened this issue, held themselves aloof and investigated chiefly by remote observation. Now Allen Kim Lang (whose Ambassador's Homecoming *you enjoyed last November) presents an investigator who plunges actively into his field of research with all the bustling energy of a miniature but sapient chipmunk . . . which, indeed, he is.*

Exchange Student

by ALLEN KIM LANG

STUMBLING-BEAR, HIS FOREPAWS clasped behind him, sauntered over to the corner of my desk for a closeup look at the photograph that stands there. Looking up at it, he uttered the tribute of a long, low whistle. "Shorty, who's the babe?" he demanded.

"That's my Kate," I said. "That's the woman who's driving me nuts."

Stumbling-Bear strolled back to my Smith-Corona and climbed up its side. Seating himself on the cylinder, he scooted around till he'd felt out the most comfortable place to sit. "It's time you learn," he said, "that having habits that madden men is a female secondary sexual characteristic, like bad driving. Take my one-and-only, for example. She's a darling, she's a doll; but she talks all the time, elocuting like she was running for Mayor and I was the whole electorate."

"Kate's not like that," I said, gazing at the photo of my almost-perfect Katherine. "With her, the itch is travel. I'm rooted right here in Indiana; but she's the kind who'd be happiest driving the lead wagon in a gypsy caravan, or keeping house on a Rhine river-barge. She doesn't seem to believe that any spot on earth is really there, until she's seen it."

Stumbling-Bear felt back into his cheekpouch with one forepaw, like a fat man inspecting a twinging molar. He brought forth for my inspection a photograph the size of Miss Liberty's portrait on the three-cent stamp. "Check this," he invited me, handing over the picture. One small fur-bearing animal looks pretty much like another to me, but I nodded approvingly as I

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handed it back with the comment, "She's a looker"—the only thing you can say when a man flashes a photo of his girl friend.

He stashed the picture back in his right cheekpouch. "This analysis of our love-lives is pleasant enough," he said, "but it's cutting no ice with my research project. I've already wasted a week. Bureaucrats! File-cabinet scholars! Our Elsewhere Department, back home at Alpha Microscopicum, must have grabbed up an outdated guidebook when I told them I was cutting out on a field-trip to Indiana, U.S.A., Sol III. They fitted me with a Ute cover-name and sent me through five semester hours of Basic Algonquian so I'd feel at home here," he said. "I even took a Recreational Elective in bow-and-arrow. If you ever want someone to knap you out a mean flint knife, Shorty, I'm your man." He sighed. "What a waste."

"Somebody fouled up," I said.

"Telling me?" Stumbling-Bear folded his forepaws and leaned back against the typewriter's paper-supports. "After I landed—I rode down on a Procyonese cruise-ship, loaded with tourists bigger than you are (no offense, Shorty)—I wandered around for hours, looking for a wickiup or the smoke of a council-fire, asking everybody directions in Chippewa. I damn near ended up in a bottle in the Zoology Department, by the way, but I managed to bite through the net. Anyway, I finally spent a week behind a beercase at Phi Delt House, learning to dig Modern American."

I lit a cigarette and braced my feet up on the desk, one foot on each side of the typewriter where Stumbling-Bear sat. I was smoking too much; but this was an occasion, having a foreign social-anthropologist to talk shop with. So what, Stumbling-Bear was only two inches tall and had fur? A being doesn't have to wear shoes and horn-rimmed glasses to be worthy of friendship. "Why'd you decide to visit me?" I asked. "Why not the head of the department? For that matter, why not Margaret Mead?"

"I came down here for original research, not instruction," Stumbling-Bear explained, swinging his hind paws out over the typebars. "It's this way. Nobody from Alpha Microscopicum has ever done work on the human group before; it's a virgin field, all mine. Your master's dissertation, *The Human Group as Organism*, persuaded me that you were the man to talk to. Your thesis has its weaknesses, to be sure; you bound toward conclusions with the speed of a home-ec coed leaping for an engagement ring; nevertheless I read your book with consuming interest."

I took my feet off the desk, not knowing whether to be charmed or annoyed by the modified praise of a creature the size of the common short-tailed shrew. "Couldn't

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you just con us from the windows of your flying saucer?" I asked.

Stumbling-Bear ruffled his forehead fur with both front paws. "You hatch bigger nonsense from smaller eggs than anyone else I've met," he said. "Flying saucers, for corn's sake! I'm a serious social scientist, Shorty, not one of those hot-rodding Procyon tourists. It's characters like the Procyonese—all loud-mouth, black-leather-jacket, and bop-talk—who've given this corner of the Galaxy its bad name. A scientist hits on a world like earth, thinking it completely unspoiled, only to find that the tourists have hit it ahead of him; buzzing airliners for kicks, paying outrageous prices for souvenirs of Atlantic City, sponsoring entertainments among the natives, littering the planet with empty *brack* jugs—agh, tourists! I nearly shifted my studies to the Coalsack, just to avoid that bunch."

"Forgive my error," I said. "What can I do to help you?"

Stumbling-Bear, who'd been tying knots in my typewriter ribbon with his rear paws, tried to stand, feeling the urge to pace; but his feet were tangled in the ribbon. "Damn this machine!" he snarled. I got out my pocketknife and slashed him free of the ribbon, twined around his paws like a two-toned boa. It cost a buck and a quarter, and was brand new, but what the hell? It was worth a gross of typewriter ribbons to get a fresh slant on the human group.

"Thanks," Stumbling-Bear said, swinging his feet free and standing up on the typewriter-cylinder. "I'd like to study small-group dynamics as you have, utilizing my somewhat more objective point of view. What I have in mind is a sort of lookout post, from which I can watch human work-groups in action, making notes without running the danger of ending up in a bottle."

I nodded. "Wouldn't your beer-case hideout at Phi Delta House have served your purpose?" I asked.

Stumbling-Bear shook his head. "Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin pretty well covered what those boys talk about," he said. "What I want is something like your setup in that salmon cannery, the observation post you describe in your classic study."

I couldn't suppress a smile of gratification. My department would doubtless tie in an Associate Professorship with my Ph.D. if the news of Stumbling-Bear's study ever reached the journals. After all, my *Human Group as Organism* was source material for scholars on other planets now.

I lit another cigarette, noticing how yellow my fingers had got. As soon as Kate said yes, I decided again, I'd quit smoking. I pulled my thoughts away from Katherine to consider the problem posed by my midget colleague. "Perhaps you

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could take up residence on some classroom bookshelf," I suggested.

"No go," Stumbling-Bear said. "A classroom is hardly a typical human group. I'd rather go into the field."

"The Dean's Office?"

"The academic atmosphere becomes cloying after a while," Stumbling-Bear said. "I've just left classes, seminars, callings of publicly-amorous freshmen onto the carpet. This is, as I said, a field-trip. I'd like to get entirely away from the trappings of formal education." He started pacing up and down the typewriter platen like a boy on a railroad track, collecting his thoughts. When he wavered and almost fell off, I raised the paper-bail for him to use as a handrail. He thanked me with a thoughtful smile.

"This is my first visit to your kith and culture," he said. "My position here in Indiana is about what yours would be if you'd just arrived on Procyon III to investigate the wife-trading moieties at North T'Cha. Would you know how to greet your complimentary Queen for a Day? To pour your first cup of *brack* over your right shoulder when the sun was to your left? Of course not. You'd need the help of a friendly native, someone who could call these quiddities of Procyonese life to your attention."

I crushed my cigarette in the ashtray. "You'd like me to serve as your friendly native, is that it?"

"It's kind of you to suggest that, Shorty," Stumbling-Bear said. "All I ask is to go with you through a typical day. I can look for that observation post I'll need for further research, for one thing. You can be helping me find answers to the hundred questions I have in mind already: what, for example, is the social significance of the Thank-God-It's-Friday Club? And, if I may make so bold as to inquire into your religious life, I'd like to investigate further your cult of the Great Goddess, that ideal hinted at in conversations and on calendars, celebrated in her thousand thin-veiled guises on the center-sheets of your magazines." He sighed. "I have so much to learn, so very little time!"

"Before we settle down to study, how about some lunch?" I suggested. My guest nodded. I stood and pulled on my jacket, somewhat wrinkled from having been draped over the back of my chair. "While we're in public," I told Stumbling-Bear, "best you stay out of sight, in case we meet any more collectors from the Zoology Department. I'll hide you here behind the handkerchief in my breast pocket. While you're in there, I can hear your questions easily enough and answer them, *sotto voce*. That way you'll see what I see, hear what I hear. OK?"

"Capital!" Stumbling-Bear jumped up on the platen. His right rear paw skidded, and he tumbled

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down onto the typebars. I lifted him out, determining by the force of the unintelligible curses he was squeaking that he was uninjured, and brushed the tg6byh7nu and TG_BYH&NU off his fur with my handkerchief. Then I dropped him down into my jacket pocket, and ruffled the ink-stained folds of the handkerchief to conceal him.

We had lunch at the faculty cafeteria, since the prices there are always several months behind the current cost-of-living reflected in the off-campus restaurants; and, more important, because Kate would be there. She had a late class, but I delighted in waiting for her each noon, drinking black coffee and thinking eupeptic thoughts.

I picked up some shrimp *à la Marseilles* for myself—Wednesday is the cook's day for experiment here—and, relying on Stumbling-Bear's rather mouselike look, got a side of cheese for him. Seated at a corner table, after glancing around to make sure I wasn't being observed by any of the other academics in the room, I clipped a corner off the cheese and dropped it into my breast pocket, behind the handkerchief. There were chewings down there, then the nibbled-at bit of cheese came flying out. "What the hell are you trying to poison me with?" Stumbling-Bear shouted, his soprano voice carrying all over the cafeteria, like a child's embarrassing question. I looked around me. When the startled glances toward my table had returned to their meals, I tried a french fry on my guest. Salting it well, I lowered it into my pocket by one end, as though I were feeding an infant crocodile. I hoped I wouldn't be driven to the extreme of having to catch flies to satisfy the demands of hospitality, but no fear. Sounds of Stumbling-Bear's busy jaws came muffled through the handkerchief, and the potato was drawn steadily down as into a grinding-machine.

I divided my mealtime between eating the foreign shrimp and feeding my fellow-student. After a while the movement of picking up a fried potato and lowering it in to him became so automatic that I no longer glanced around before doing so. When I did look up, after dessert, it was to see Kate, my quintessential woman, walking toward our table, carrying her tray, a book under one arm. I sprang up to take the tray from her, help her with the chair, arrange her plates for her. "What is this ceremony?" Stumbling-Bear demanded, thrusting his head out into the open.

"I'll explain it to you later," I said, speaking from the side of my mouth, shoving him down out of sight.

"What did you say, Richard?" Kate asked.

"Nothing," I said. There was an alien stirring going on over my heart, as Stumbling-Bear fought to

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join us. I clapped my hand over him and sat down across from Kate, looking the very model of sincerity with my hand thus on my heart. With my free hand I salted a french fry to distract my guest, and lowered it in to him.

Kate had brought me a second cup of coffee, as she always does when she sees I've preceded her to lunch. I sipped at it and stared at her, feeling the wonder a child would, confronted by a sudden Rock Candy Mountain.

How can I describe my lovely Katherine without sounding like a pathologist taking inventory in the Med School's bone-eye-vein-and-blood bank? Her eyes? Eye-colored: they change, like the sea, with the light; they're long-lashed and mostly dark, with a kind of animal fission going on within them to throw out sparks of laughter. Figure? The kind that's used in the ads for swim-suits. Her smile? Oh, you see what I mean. My Kate's beauty can't be anatomized like some formalined dogfish in the Biology Labs. A hammering over my heart recalled me to movement. I lowered a french fry into my pocket to keep Stumbling-Bear busy.

Kate glanced up from her shrimp. "What's wrong with you, Richard?" she asked.

"Nothing, Katherine," I said. I wondered whether I'd be wise to introduce Stumbling-Bear to Kate, and tell her that my *Human Group as Organism* was being read at the ends of the galaxy. I guessed not. I wanted Kate to love me for myself, not for my contributions to sociology.

A bent french fry sailed up from my pocket and plummeted square into Kate's coffee. "Needs salt!" Stumbling-Bear piped, in the voice of an ill-bred three-year-old.

Kate thoughtfully fished the fragment of potato from her coffee with her fork. She turned those eyes on me and shook her head. "That was a cute trick, Richard; but better suited to the stage than to the table."

"Kate, I didn't—"

"What in hell's going on out there?" the same juvenile voice delinquently demanded.

"Richard," Kate said.

"I've got a surprise to show you, but not here," I began.

Stumbling-Bear, stronger than I'd have guessed, thrust his head between my restraining fingers and peered out at Kate. "Hi!" he said.

I took Kate's book and propped it open on the table, so that its opening faced away from the rest of the dining room, and took out my guest to set him between the open pages. "Kate, this is Stumbling-Bear," I said, leaving the niceties of the introduction up to him.

"A chipmunk!" Kate said. "Richard, I didn't know you were interested in biology."

"Sister, when you're around, the man not interested in biology is

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meat for the morgue," Stumbling-Bear said.

Kate blushed a little at this square-edged compliment, and sipped her coffee. "Is this ventriloquism your surprise, Richard?" she asked.

"So you're the famous English teacher," Stumbling-Bear said. "Shorty told me—"

"More potatoes?" I interrupted, pushing one toward him. "You've got to forgive Stumbling-Bear's conversational crudities," I said to Kate. "He learned English in a fraternity house."

Stumbling-Bear spurned the potato. "May I call you Kate, Kate?" he asked. "You're ten times prettier than your lovely photo."

"Thank you," Kate said. "Are you really talking?"

"I sing, dance, and do imitations, too," Stumbling-Bear boasted. "And I can recite all three kinds of limericks, though mostly the third sort." He launched into a few steps of a soft-shoe dance as demonstration of his talents, then stopped. "But don't get me wrong, Kate. I'm a serious anthropologist, despite my lighter side."

Kate swallowed down a great deal of coffee very rapidly. I got up to refill our cups, and to get Stumbling-Bear a spoonful of apple jelly by way of dessert. By the time I'd got back to the table, Kate and my visitor were conversing like old friends. They stopped talking as I came within earshot, and Kate glanced up at me and blushed, through a smile. I wondered what Stumbling-Bear had told her.

"It seems strange that you'd have chosen Richard as earth's spokesman," Kate addressed herself to Stumbling-Bear after I'd sat. "Of course, you couldn't have found a better man for keeping you a secret, if you wished it. He'd never dream of telling anyone that intelligences from across the stars were watching us; would you, Richard?"

"Don't sell your boyfriend short, Kate," Stumbling-Bear defended me. "Shorty may be no collar ad, but the boy's got brains."

"I know," Kate said, taking my hand.

"Excuse me, Stumbling-Bear," I said. "Kate, I'd like to see you this evening. We can catch a movie at the drive-in, stop somewhere for sandwiches and beer, maybe dance a little. I want to talk to you."

"If you two don't mind," Stumbling-Bear interrupted, "I'd like to come along. I've never seen one of your movies. I might get a footnote out of it."

"You want to see movies, I'll stake you to the Saturday-afternoon cowboy show," I said. I shook out a cigarette, broke it in two, and lit the shorter half: I had to cut down somehow. "You see, Stumbling-Bear, human sociologists are agreed that the optimum small group including an unmarried male and a nubile girl is the pair, not the trio."

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"Interesting, if true," he said. He took a tiny pad and a sort of pencil from his left cheekpouch, where he seemed to be concealing as much gear as could be stowed in a B-4 bag. The pencil-device squirted whole ideographs each time he pressed its point to paper. "I'm learning, Shorty," he said, scribbling grimly. "You're making it difficult, but I'm learning."

"How about this evening, Kate?" I asked again.

"Of course, Richard; about seven fifteen will be fine." She turned to Stumbling-Bear. "You don't really mind our leaving you this evening, do you?" she asked him.

"Not at all, Kate," Stumbling-Bear replied. "But you watch yourself, alone with this guy."

"I'll be very careful," Kate promised, smiling at me. I picked up my guest and fitted him back into my coat pocket, feeling all of six feet tall in the glow of that smile.

Stumbling-Bear had said he wanted to see me through a typical day. So be it, I decided. I'd make no effort at giving him a survey course in Indiana Today. I'd simply show him the world of a stay-at-home instructor in sociology, climbing through the jungle-gym of academic publications toward my Ph.D., and maybe a full Professorship at forty.

My visitor sat behind a copy of Wish's *Society and Thought in Modern America* in my classroom, taking copious notes, while I lectured thirty-seven freshmen on the American family. Studying the hungry faces of the boys, seeing the dedicated looks on the girls those boys were hungry for, I felt this lecture to be timely. Perhaps I could help these youngsters in the great adventure they were so eager to set out upon. I thought of Kate, and let my mouth follow my lecture-notes while my mind wrote the script of a great adventure starring Kate and me.

The end of the hour resurrected the freshmen, and they left in pairs. I asked Stumbling-Bear what he'd thought of my talk. He glanced down at his notes. "You slid from the east-west proportion of marriage to divorce to some motion picture that's playing in the open air tonight," he said. "I'm afraid I don't quite grasp the significance of this latter to the American family."

"The concept is abstruse," I hedged, hoping that none of my students had larded my plans for the evening into his notes. No need to worry, I decided. Springtime freshmen don't take notes.

I picked up a stack of test papers three inches thick, intending to take them home. I could get them graded by seven, if none of my undergraduates had erupted an original thought. I slipped Stumbling-Bear back into my pocket. "Where are we going?" he asked, as we went out and got into my ancient Dodge.

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"We're going to the Post office for my mail," I said. "Bills settle into my box there like silt at the mouth of the Nile. I have to clear the channel daily, or mail would back up to flood the whole International Postal Union." I drove across town, parked in front of the Post Office, and put a penny in the parking meter. Stumbling-Bear scribbled a page of notes on this Indiana parking-ceremony.

Stumbling-Bear peeked from my pocket as we walked through the gallery of glowering *wanted for federal income tax evasion* fliers, past the job-descriptions dangling outside the Civil Service window like scalps, to the tier of glass-fronted post-office boxes. I stood on tiptoe to look into Box 1141, assigned to me by the Postmaster so that I might daily be reminded that he's taller than I am. Mail is something of an occasion with me, even though the letters I get are mostly requests to contribute, so when I saw that there was something in there I opened the door quickly. The something proved to be a request, printed in patriotic colors, that I use Air Parcel Post as often as I could. "Damn," I said.

"Nothing yet from the Nobel Prize Committee, eh, Shorty?" Stumbling-Bear asked.

How can you backhand a character two inches tall? He was staring at the open mailbox door, and jittering in my pocket. "Hey, Shorty! Put me inside there, will you?"

Though I didn't yet see what Stumbling-Bear was getting at, I did as he asked. "Close the door, please," he called down. I did, leaving the key in. My guest paced back and forth on the grillwork bottom of the box, peered out through the glass window to make sure I was still with him, then went back to stare out at the postal workers sorting mail. He came up front again and tapped on the door till I'd unlocked it. "It's perfect!" he exulted. "I can sit up here and take notes ad lib, watching the workers go about their appointed rounds in the back, observing the postage-stamp purchasers up front: an endless orrery of human groups."

"It's a motion," I admitted, "but the Post Office Department might not approve. They rent me this box to get mail in, not to sub-let as an apartment."

"I won't be holding any parties here, Shorty," he argued. "Besides, I'm willing to be a little cramped for space, to suffer some for Science. Weren't you crowded in your cubbyhole at the salmon cannery? Wasn't *The Human Group as Organism* worth it? We social anthropologists don't expect our laboratories to be as spacious as those the bomb-chemists use."

"That's true enough," I said, "but there's another little problem that occurs to me. The light's

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pretty good in there, but there's no indoor plumbing in a post-office box."

"True," Stumbling-Bear agreed. "But do you think I could go through eight years at the University without having the sense I need to come in out of the rain, or to find the trail to the postal-workers' powder room? No sweat, Shorty."

"OK, Stumbling-Bear," I said. "The apartment is yours. Happy hunting."

"Thanks. I've got everything here I'll need, if you could see your way to bringing me an occasional box lunch," he said. I nodded, and Stumbling-Bear brought his pad and pencil, and a tiny flask of some sort, from his cheekpouches. He leaned out to grab the door of P. O. Box 1141, preparing to slam it shut and get to work. "I'll be seeing you pretty often, I guess," he said. "I'd appreciate the opportunity to discuss my tentative findings with a fellow scientist."

"Why, sure," I agreed. I was pleased that the little guy had so taken me into his confidence. The freemasonry of science, I now saw, included not only the dedicated men of earth but scholars from Stumbling-Bear's world, and perhaps from a thousand others. "I'll see you tomorrow, and bring lunch," I said. He slammed the door, and I pulled out and pocketed my key. To say goodby, I waved through the glass. I turned to leave, and saw that the man behind the Civil Service window was staring at me like an alienist. I cool-headedly lit half a cigarette, stared back at the civil servant, and sauntered out to my Dodge.

Truth to tell, I was glad to get Stumbling-Bear off my hands and out of my pocket for the evening. When a man's going out with the girl of his dreams, he doesn't want an impartial observer in his pocket, recording his every word for eventual publication in the scholarly journals of another planet. I noticed a grease-stain on my jacket, down below the french-fry pocket, and stopped to drop it off at the cleaner's.

Kate was wearing a pale yellow dress that looked as cool as lemon sherbet, emphasizing the smooth coffee-with-cream tan of her shoulders and arms. Fifty-eight inches of concentrated woman, I thought, smiling down at her from my five-feet-three. "You don't look much like my old English teacher this evening," I said, taking her hand to lead her out to the Dodge.

"I don't feel much like an English teacher this evening," Kate said, sliding way over in the front seat, to be close-up beside me. "I just feel like a girl."

I thought that sounded promising.

We had malts and cheeseburgers, then drove to the movie for the first show. The drive-in was featuring

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one of those horizontal spectaculars, an epic filled by a million milling extras building cardboard pyramids, loaded with the message that even Egyptian slavegirls had bosoms. "I'd love to go to Egypt," Kate murmured. I took her hand and squeezed it, trying to remind her that us Hoosiers belong in Indiana. "Wouldn't you like to see Cairo, Richard?" Kate asked, not having caught my message.

"No," I said, maybe a little violently. "Kate, I saw a dozen countries in the days I was modeling that khaki war-suit; and I learned that anywhere on earth, I'm still me. Egypt wouldn't make me any more or less than me. Kiss me, Kate," I ad-libbed, trying to get her mind off Rand-McNally.

Kate complied, and warmly; but I knew she was still scheming travel. She sighed. "Wouldn't it thrill you to see *As You Like It* in Stratford-on-Avon, or hear *Hamlet* at Kronborg Castle?" she asked.

"We've got no castles here," I said, "but we've got everything else I want from life. Study and teaching; a wife and kids." From Kate's answering squeeze, I judged that this had got through; and she'd stopped musing all over the map.

After the evil Pharaoh had been deposed by de Mille, we drove out to the Constellation Club for a couple of deep-dish martinis and some dancing. Kate, primed by the technicolor travelogue, murmured an obbligato of tourist talk in my ear as we danced. She was eager as a Moslem for Mecca, but Kate's Mecca was anywhere at all. I listened patiently enough while she spoke of foreign places with romantic names and ubiquitous flies, places where the food was probably fried in camel fat and served on leaves. I didn't comment. Even with her bug for globetrotting, I thought, Kate was the woman for me. I'd have loved her if she'd bowled.

I suppose you've noticed that when you think about anything long enough and often enough, it's bound to happen, but hardly ever in the way you expected. What with the dancing, and the sparkle of Kate's wanderlustful eyes across our martinis, and the presence in my watch pocket of the ring I'd made down-payment on two days after I'd first met her, that's the way it happened to me. I'd prepared phrases for this moment-of-truth, like a tourist going into a Mexican marketplace primed with memorized Spanish sentences, but I forgot the lot. I just out and said, "Kate, let's get married."

My lovely little teacher, the girl who dealt every day with *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and *Romeo and Juliet,* pledged her troth to me with, "Sure, Richard."

That evening, it took us longer than ever before to say goodnight.

Driving very slowly home, I thought of stopping to acquaint

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the new resident of P. O. Box 1141 with my happy lot, and to invite him to our wedding. But not yet, I decided. Stumbling-Bear would likely regard my engagement to Kate as simply another phase of human culture to be set down on his note-pad, or he'd involve me in a discussion of those loose-living inhabitants of Procyon III. I'd tell him later, when the bubbles had settled down a bit in my brain.

I got through the next morning's classes by a series of lazy ploys: giving lightning-tests, assigning lengthy bibliographies, sending battalions of freshmen to the library. I had, I reminded myself from minute to minute, been chosen by Kate to be her husband. I felt the need of wires across the top of my head, to hold in my happiness like champagne.

The cold water dashed over me at noon. Kate and I met in the faculty cafeteria to discuss our coming solemnities over the corned-beef hash. Her first words, after a smile several paragraphs long, were, "Richard, where will we go?"

I closed my eyes and clenched my jaws. Here it was, the single incompatibility between us, rearing its malformed head again. Travel. As though a few miles on the map could add to our felicity! I opened my eyes. "Kate, do we have to run off somewhere?" I asked. "Can't we just find ourselves an apartment near the campus, and settle down right off, like sensible adults? We could spend our honeymoon—part of it, anyway—hanging the curtains and getting the furniture set the way you want it."

"Richard, you're about as romantic as a plumber's friend," Kate said. "People don't act like sensible adults right after they're married; instead they run off like children on a picnic, so they can be alone together."

That part I liked.

"Another thing, Richard. I can see us staying here for our honeymoon. Picture it: your Phi Delta brothers making our evenings hideous with Rabelaisian auto-horns and coarse shouting, sending us telegrams of congratulation and baskets of tiger lilies at fifteen-minute intervals, causing the representatives of dairies and diaper services to pound on our front door from morning till night. I know that bunch, Richard. We'll have to get away from the campus, if only in self-defense."

I pondered. This was indeed a sharp-horned dilemma. I couldn't offend my bride-designate, nor could I look with unjaundiced eye toward a fortnight's schedule-wrestling, following the spoor of mislaid luggage, tipping our way through gantlets of hotel employees . . . Kate had hit on an argument of considerable force, though, when she'd mentioned the Phi Delts. Those boys, given the marriage of a brother who'd shown

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the bad form of becoming a teacher, could treat him and his bride to a hazing that would make the wildest Basque shivaree seem tame as a Quaker ice-cream social. We had to escape that wolfpack.

"We could go to London," Kate said, her eyes closed to see more clearly Westminster Bridge and the companile of Big Ben. I was thinking of British cooking. "We could visit Paris, Vienna, Nice," she said. "Tourist class would be fine, Richard. We wouldn't have to spend much."

"We could stay at home, and spend even less," I pointed out; but backed down at the sight of her frown. "All right, Kate. You win, just like in the women's magazines. I'll compromise my principles, go anywhere you say: but with one provision. You'll have to make the reservations and buy the tickets and pick out the luggage and borrow the maps and take care of all the rest of the miserable prelude to travel. Fair enough?"

"Richard, that's wonderful!" Kate said. "Those are things I love to do, getting ready to travel. I've got nearly a thousand dollars saved in the bank—"

"Fine," I said. "Buy us a grand's-worth of globetrotting. I'll keep my bankroll for setting up housekeeping when we get back, and to pay the doctor bills for the sunburn and dyspepsia and exotic rashes we'll come home with." I sipped my coffee, feeling a bit more at ease. A thousand dollars is a pretty short leash these days, barely enough to cross the state line with. We'd be spared the tour of Hong Kong, the Mediterranean cruise where the tourists are guinea pigs on whom is tested the relative oiliness of the various cuisines of South Europe. "I'll go with you anywhere we can afford," I said. "Anywhere that thousand bucks of yours will take us. But please, Kate, don't tell me anything about our trip till we're on our way. I'll get trainsick when the time comes, and avoid the anticipation."

"Just as you say, Richard," Kate said, smiling again.

Phi Delt House threw me a stag supper, as is the custom of that brotherhood. It was loud, in the tradition of such affairs; and I was given considerable to drink, together with no end of undergraduate advice on the non-sacramental side of marriage. I was presented a small keg of aspirin tablets as memento of the occasion, most of which I used the next day in medicating the monumental hangover my brethren had sponsored.

On the penultimate day of my bachelorhood, I made the final payment on the rings. Our plans were crystallized, Kate said; doubtless some travel agent was rubbing his hands now in anticipation of our fee. Nothing was left but to be wed and on our way. We'd been duly blood-tested and found pure;

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we'd each obtained two weeks' leave from the University; I'd packed enough gear to spend a fortnight anywhere between the Arctic Circle and Hobart, Tasmania. I felt better, now. Two weeks away from home, I told myself, were small enough price for the privilege of living with Kate for the rest of my life.

I visited Stumbling-Bear seldom, busy as I was preparing to move from my bachelor room to our conjugal apartment; and I'd given Kate the spare key to the box. She said he was prospering there, getting plump on the daily packets of french fries she brought him. Kate told me she often found our little scholar curled up with a copy of *Time* or *Sociological Abstracts,* gleaning footnotes to his own researches. No doubt she discussed with Stumbling-Bear her plans for our nuptial flight. She had to talk travel with someone, and she'd promised not to talk it to me.

The day had come to say goodby to my colleague from Alpha Microscopicum, and to evict him from P. O. Box 1141. Two weeks' uncollected mail, I knew, would leave Stumbling-Bear with mighty little room for note-taking, and this town was too full of avid zoologists for him to consider foraging for french fries on his own. I drove to the Post Office and shook him out of *The Reporter* to give him his notice. We'd leave tomorrow, I said, right after the Justice of the Peace had granted our union the formal blessings of the State of Indiana.

"So tomorrow's the big day," Stumbling-Bear said, grinning so wide his whiskers stuck up like antennae. "Shorty, I congratulate you! I've already nominated Kate for Miss Rheingold: that shows you how highly I regard her."

"She'll be flattered," I said. "But I've brought bad news, too. You'll have to find other accommodations, Stumbling-Bear. Kate won't be here to bring your lunches, nor to clear out the bills so you'll have room for thoughtful pacing."

Stumbling-Bear triumphantly dug out his note-pad from his cheek-pouch and displayed it to me, riffling through the pages. Covered with almost-microscopic ideographs, every sheet was filled to its margins. "I'm done," he gloated. "I've discovered dynamic processes within the human group that are mentioned nowhere else in the literature. Shorty, my Ph.D. is as good as nailed to the wall."

"Fellow-scholar," I grinned back at him, "I'm proud of you!"

"I'll send you an abstract of my dissertation," he promised modestly, replacing the note-pad in his cheek. He paused to smooth his whiskers with a front paw. "I have one final favor to ask of you," he said. "I'd like to meet your bride again, so that I may wish her every happiness. Kate and I have become good friends over those french fries, Shorty."

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"I'm glad," I said. "I'll bring Kate back here after supper." I paused. "Where will you go from here, Stumbling-Bear?"

"Remember my girlfriend?" he asked, flashing her picture again to refresh my memory. "She's coming in on the Procyonese ship that's going to take us on our honeymoon."

I solemnly shook Stumbling-Bear's right front paw. "I'm glad for you," I said. "Bachelor life is sadly overrated." Then I closed the box door, so that he could be getting his gear together.

By the time Kate and I got back to the Post Office, Stumbling-Bear was all spruced up. His fur, usually so ruffled that he looked like an ill-kempt asterisk, was now brushed sleek as a dachshund's. He smelled of lilac after-shave lotion, filched, I had no doubt, from the shaving kit some postal employee had left in the men's room. His whiskers must have been waxed, the way they perked out, giving him a mustache that would do credit to any RAF Wing Commander.

"Good evening, Kate," he said, bowing from the waist as I opened the door of Box 1141. There was no one around, so I set him out on the glass top of the money-order counter. "I've already congratulated Shorty on his remarkable good fortune in hoodwinking you into matrimony," Stumbling-Bear told Kate. "It remains only for me to wish you the happiness beauty deserves." His brown eyes twinkled. "Or, as the little girl told her third-grade teacher on a similar occasion, I wish you a joyous and sexful marriage."

Kate set him up on the palm of her hand. "You're a little rogue," she laughed. "May I wish, once you've married that lovely little girl of yours, that the two of you will be blessed with at least a dozen brown-eyed cubs as handsome as their father?"

"You may, and thank you," Stumbling-Bear purred, stroking his mustache. "Kate, should I give Shorty the wedding gift now?"

"Wedding gift?" I asked. "Stumbling-Bear, you shouldn't have!"

He took a tiny envelope from his cheekpouch and presented it to me. "Here it is, Shorty; and may all your troubles be little ones. Maybe you'd better not open it yet."

"It might be best if he didn't," Kate agreed.

"Hey, what kind of conspiracy is this?" I demanded. "What have you two plotters hatched out together?"

"Well," Stumbling-Bear said, "me and Kate thought I should be your best man, if that's all right with you."

"Fine," I said. "But the Monroe County Justice of the Peace might not approve of a Best Man from Outer Space. They're a conservative lot, J.P.'s."

"Don't be pedestrian, Shorty,"

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Stumbling-Bear said. "It's all settled: just ask Kate. You and her and me and my girl will be hitched in a double wedding, and we'll best-man for each other. OK?"

"Sure," I said, without too much conviction. "Have you applied for an Indiana marriage license?"

"Indiana-schmindiana!" Stumbling-Bear snorted. "We're going to be married first class, Shorty. I'll even see to it that the Captain wears his Dress Whites for the ceremony."

"Run that last reel over, slow-motion," I told him. "I've got the feeling something slipped by me just then."

"Richard," Kate broke in, "you said, and I quote, 'I'll go with you anywhere we can afford.' Right, Richard?"

"Unquote," I said. "So?"

"So I reserved us a suite at a hotel highly recommended by our friend Stumbling-Bear," she said. "The rates are surprisingly low."

"The place rates four stars in all the guidebooks," Stumbling-Bear murmured. "Excellent kitchen, remarkable cellars."

"How about getting there?" I asked. "Do we hitchhike, Kate?"

"No, Richard," she said. "We'll use Stumbling-Bear's wedding gift. Our reservations are at the North T'Cha Honeymoon Hostel; and we'll get there by means of his wonderful present: two round-trip tickets to Procyon III."

I grabbed tight to the glass top of the money-order counter. "I knew you'd be delighted, Shorty," Stumbling-Bear said, twisting his mustache up at the ends till he looked like a Mephistopheles in miniature. "Our weddings will be held as soon as our ship has cleared the Asteroid Belt. That should be about midnight, tonight." He extracted a tiny velvet-covered case from his left cheekpouch and handed it up to me. "Hold tight to this," he cautioned me.

"What is it?" I asked.

"My girl's wedding ring," he said. "Give me Kate's, Shorty. Isn't that the way this best-man racket works?"

"Kate?" I asked, begging her to tell me that we were only going to New York City, or Hong Kong, even.

"Give the man the ring," she said firmly.

I knew I was licked the moment I saw my best man slip Kate's wedding ring into his cheekpouch, holding it handy for the moment the Captain nodded to me, several million miles from now.

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A curious story, this: an odd blend of modern crime, Eighteenth Century science/magick (take your pick), and little-known historical lore—in all, you'd say, a story that only Avram Davidson could write. But the fact is, according to Mr. Davidson, that "the original idea and some of the best touches" arise from the equally unpredictable imagination of Ward Moore. However the credit is to be distributed in this not-quite-collaboration, the result is attractively off-beat even for its unconventional creators.

I Do Not Hear You, Sir

by AVRAM DAVIDSON

BLOODGOOD BIXBEE KNEW NOTHING about Art, but he knew what he didn't like: What he didn't like, he said—loudly and with much profane redundancy—was Bein Played For A Sucker . . . See?

Milo Anderson saw, all right; he knew he should never have sold Bixbee the unauthenticated Wilson Peale, any more than he should have collected in advance the five per cent of the contract which he knew he could never negotiate. But there were so few people left in the capital whom he could still expect to swindle . . . and he needed the money. He had counted too much on Bixbee's not being able to admit participation in an illegal deal, and it certainly wasn't the moral aspect of not telling the rich lumberman about the cloud on the picture's title which worried him. In fact, nothing about Bixbee had worried him at the time—for who, back in Qualliupp, Washington, would know a Wilson Peale from a citron peel?—all that concerned him had been getting the check to the bank in time. And then to the phone . . .

Checks, checks, telephones, telephones, and . . .

Damn them all, with their greedy open hands and yapping mouths.

Big crooks have littler crooks to bite 'um,
And so on down, ad infinitum.

Wasn't Bloodgood Bixbee a crook, stealing lumber rights and ravishing the forests with a ruthless hand? Sure he was. And then following the classic pattern of try-

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ing to set himself up as a man of culture, with Genuine Oil Paintings on his walls. How the *Hell* did he find out, anyway? Was it possible that even Qualliupp had in it someone like Edmond Hart Ransome, from whom Milo had gotten the picture? No, impossible. The whole State of Washington was too new to interest old E. H. R. who seldom concerned himself with anything later than the end of the 1700's.

Anderson ran over in his mind the list of those with whom he had done business. Some one of them—there had to be at least *one*—would be in a mood to help him now, to advance money against future cooperation.

He dialed an unlisted number, tried to swallow. A man's voice, very quiet and cautious: "Yes?"

"Ovlomov?" He must not seem too—

"Who is this?" the voice inquired. A man with whom Mr. Ovlomov had done business? Didn't he know that Mr. Ovlomov had returned only that day to his homeland? He should follow the newspapers—No, no—he, the one speaking, was not interested in Ovlomov's contacts. Nor would it be of any use to call again: the number was being discontinued: Ovlomov was indiscreet.

So that way—the way of being a tenth-rate spy pretending to be a third-rate one—was out, and he was no closer to being clear of his snarl of checks and phone calls: people he was blackmailing (but only able to get small sums from), people who were blackmailing *him* (and getting large sums). For a while he had had an easy stretch, living at old Ransome's place.

The lease was up in a few days—another problem.

It wasn't as if the painting wasn't his, Ransome had left it to him, it was clear enough in his will. That was the devilish part of it—before simply stating "and all the rest of my property now located in my apartment," the old man had "left" him, had specifically named, every single article Milo had stolen from him. He had *known*. "And this bequest I make for a reason well known to my secretary, the said Milo Anderson." Rubbing it in. *Always* rubbing it in. *"Fast horses and slow women, eh, Mr. Anderson?"* That sort of thing.

Perhaps it would have been better not to have meddled with the old man's medicine bottles—but it was *so* easy—and so soon after the doctor had called; no trouble about a death certificate . . . *All the rest of my property . . . for a reason well-known to the said Milo Anderson.*

But little enough property was left in the apartment by now.

By now everything was coming all at once: Bloodgood Bixbee wanting his money back and raving raw head and bloody bones if

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he didn't get it. Big Patsy the bookmaker wanting the markers to be made good, wanting it right away, not threatening but promising. And Mrs. Pritchard, her voice like half-melted margarine: "Carried you on the books a long time, Milo—been good to you—we all've been good to you. Now we have to get the money because the Syndicate goes over the books tomorrow, and you know what *that* means, Milo."

And he knew, oh, he *knew* all right. Even before the phone rang and the voice—an ordinary coarse unlettered unviolent sort of voice, saying its say as the cabbie might ask Where To or the laundryman announce the bill—Anderson: Get it ready, get the money ready, we'll pick it up (by now the voice a bit bored with so many routine calls) as soon after midnight as we get around there. . . .

Milo Anderson's eye ran hopelessly around the apartment. Over the mantelpiece (or over where the marble had been before he'd sold it) was the faded place where the alleged Wilson Peale had hung before going to take its place over the silent hi-fi set in the Bloodgood Bixbee place in Qualiupp (who'd bother with hi-fi when the TV offered such quality fare?). The cabinet of old coins had stood over there—the Pine Tree shillings, the "York" pieces, half-reales, the dismes: all sold by now, and sold well, but the money long ago (it seemed long ago) spent . . . Big Patsy, Mrs. Pritchard, and all the others . . . Edward Hart Ransome's place had been stuffed with the treasures of the late 1700's, but almost everything had been sold or pawned by now except for a few pieces of essential furniture. These had been already priced and would bring only a fraction of what was needed.

Milo Anderson was not more fearful than most men, perhaps he was a degree less fearful. But there were too many things piling up just now. Everybody was putting the screws on him and there was nobody he could squeeze in turn—not *now*—not *tonight* . . . Like a hungry man who opens and reopens icebox and pantry: there must be *some* food left, only let me look once more: Milo roamed the shadowy apartment, looking and peering and hoping and fearing, something to sell, something overlooked, *something* . . .

With sweat cold on his back and with kneecaps articulating far from firmly he pawed among the discards the dealers had left. Bellows, wool-carders, trivets ("Three fr a quarter on the Boston Post Road," the dealer said.), apple-corers and nutmeg graters, new model spinningwheels . . . and *this* damned thing. Whatever *it* was. The dealer had simply laughed. Milo was about to kick it. He groaned, sighed heavily, listlessly began to examine it.

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Basic design was a cabinet, a smallish box, done—he peered closer—in curly cherrywood, a favorite wood of the period. It stood on four legs and on *one* side was a little wheel and on the *other* side, just sticking out, was a curved copper or brass . . . funnel, was it? He twisted the metal horn, it moved under pressure. He turned the wheel. Nothing happened, and this was, of course, wrong: for no Colonial craftsman would have spent time making a device which didn't *do* anything. He spun the wheel again, and a bell tinkled inside.

Well, yes—a box had to have an inside. Why hadn't he looked inside? People (he pushed a stubborn peg) were always hiding money inside of . . . There. The panel slid open easily enough. The bell tinkled again, a tiny silver bell on a silver loop in an upper corner. A small black horn (calf? bison?) hung on a thong. Copper wires led from the small end of the horn, and parchment, like a tiny drumhead, covered the wide end. Wedged firmly behind a glass panel were two glass jars lined with metal foil.

The thing to do was to get a hammer and—the bell rang a third time. Death, he thought, was waiting, and here *he* was, playing with an antique toy. He seized the horn, was about to tear it loose, then he put it to his ear instead. At once he dropped it and jumped.

"Your conversant, Sir?" That was what the horn had said in his ear. Or was it, "You're conversant . . . ?" What was the apparatus supposed to be, a music box with vox humana, a primitive phonograph, a . . . No, if it resembled any piece of equipment he was familiar with, it was the telephone. Without stopping to rationalize his action in turning eagerly to anything which could divert him from his trouble, he thought, Let's see: Buffalo horn to ear, speak into . . . mm . . . copper tube (funnel, trumpet) on outside. Feeling a bit foolish, he said—what else *could* he say but: "Hello?"

The odd voice in his ear repeated what it had said before. Milo asked, "Conversant with *what?*"

"With *whom,* Sir," the voice corrected him; and then, as he remained baffled and silent: "I do not hear you, Sir. Pray consult the compendium, Sir, for the cypher of the conversant desired. . . . Servant, Sir."

"Hello? Hello? Hey!" He even whistled shrilly, but there was no reply.

Putting the horn down he began pressing and poking around the box, and dislodged something from a narrow space under the shelf where the odd jars were. It was a small thin leatherbound book. He opened it. Obviously laid paper, linen-rag, age-yellowed and "foxed": brown-flecked . . . names, numbers . . . turn to the front . . .

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THE COMPENDIUM OF THE NAMES, RESIDENCES, & CYPHERS OF THE HONORABLE & WORTHY PATRONS OF THE MAGNETICKAL INTELLIGENCE ENGINE.

Assuming—and a crazy-mad assumption it was, but here the thing stood in front of him—assuming that the telephone, or some long-forgotten precursor of it, *had* been invented in those days . . . But how could it still be working? Or was this some quirk of a few other off-beat antiquarians like old Ransome, to have their own odd-ball Bell System? Or was he simply out of his senses and imagining it all? Oh, well. He turned the page.

EXORDIUM. *The Artificers of this Device have spared neither Pains nor Oeconomy to obtain the primest Materials and Workmanship, the Cabinetmaking being that of Mr. D. Phyfe, the Leyden-jars and other Magnetick Parts are the Manufactory of Dr. B. Franklin, Mr. P. Revere has fabrickated the Copper and Brass, and Mr. Meyer Meyers the Pewter and Silver.*

SUBMONITION. *The Cypher of each Patron is listed Alphabetickally. Spin the Wheel and on perceiving the Tintinnabulation of the Bell, Inform the Engineer of the Cypher of the Conversant desired.*

CAVEAT. *It is absolutely inhibited to tamper with the Leyden-jars.*

Still dubious, but certainly curious, so much so that he even forgot his own danger, Anderson looked through the book. Almost automatically his finger stopped at *Washington, Geo., Gent. Planter, Mt. Vernon.* He spun the wheel. The bell tinkled. He put the small horn to his ear.

"Your conversant, Sir?"

This time he was prepared. He cleared his throat and said, "Patriot 1-7-7-0."

"Your servant, Sir." Somewhere away another little bell began to tinkle.

"Say—Engineer?" Milo ventured.

"Servant, Sir."

"Um . . . what's your name?"

"There are no names, Sir."

Trrrinnggg . . . trrrinnggg . . .

"Well, uh, what *time* are you in —or where *are* you?"

"There is neither time nor place, Sir. And it is not permitted to hold non-pertinent discourse whilst the engine is in use, Sir." Trrrinnggg . . .

Suddenly the parchment crackled and a deep voice boomed from the horn: "Ah heah you, Seh!" Milo swallowed.

"Mr. *Wash*ington?" Surely not yet General in 1770.

"Yes, Seh—*and* no thanks to you, Seh! What do you mean by it, you damned horse-leecher? Sellin me these *con*founded artifized denticles—! Why, a wind-broken, bog-spavined *stal*lion couldn't get 'em comftable in his mouth!" The false teeth were heard clacking and grinding. The Patriot's voice rose.

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"Haven't ett a decent piece of butcher's meat in *days!* Live on syllabub and sugar-tiddy! Plague take your flimsy British crafts—give me honest Colonial works, say I!" The outraged voice rang in Milo's ear, then died away.

Mistaken for a quack dentist! Perhaps the only crime he never had committed. Milo wanted to call back, found he'd forgotten the number—the "cypher," rather—but the place where it had been was blank. He shivered. The engineer's voice responded to his signal. "What is George Washington's cypher?" Milo demanded.

"That intelligence is not available, Sir. Pray consult—"

"But it's no longer *in* the compendium!"

"Cyphers not in the compendium do not exist. . . . Your servant, Sir."

Well, so much for the Father of His Country. Anderson had discovered a hitherto-overlooked cause of the American Revolution, but a lot of good it did him. Once again, he realized his position. There was no one he could turn to—not in the present, anyway. Not knowing what else *to* do, he turned once more to the past. Spun the wheel, opened the little book.

"Your conversant, Sir?"

"Printinghouse 1-7-7-1. . . ." Trr-rinnggg . . . The voice was brisk, still retaining after all the years a trace of the Boston twang.

"We must all hang together or we shall surely hang separately. . . . What's your need, neighbor? The colonies should and will unite, but meanwhile the day's work goes on."

"Benjamin Franklin I presume?"

"That same, my friend. Job-printing? Nice new line of chapbooks for your pleasure and instruction? Latest number of Poor Richard's Almanack? Bay Psalm Book? Biblical Concordance? Hey?"

"No, no . . ."

The voice dropped a notch, became confidential. "Just on hand by the last vessel to arrive in port, a French novel in three volumes . . . no? Make you a special price for *Fanny Hill!*"

"Dr. Franklin"—Milo grew anxious— "I need your help. I appreciate—I appeal to you—a Fellow American—" he stumbled.

The voice grew wary, then a trifle amused. "Nay, nay, I'm too old a tomcod to be taken with such bait as that. None of your Tory tricks. If you're working for Sir William Johnson, now, tell him—"

"But—"

"Tell him I'm a loyal subject of the King until he proves otherwise. I do but propose a continental union against French Lewis, the Dons, and the savage Enjians—though if Providence doesn't take most of these off our hands by rum and pox—"

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Milo cried, "My life's in terrible danger!"

"Sell you a nice ephemeris—you can cast your horoscope and thus see the hazards you must needs discountenance. . . . Stove? Sell you a Franklin st—"

Of course, the cypher had vanished from the book and from his memory. It was plain he was allowed but one call to each name. And time was running short: it grew close to midnight and he could expect to hear from the Syndicate about the money he owed Mrs. Pritchard—if Bloodgood Bixbee and his friends, or Big Patsy and *his* friends didn't arrive first.

Well, no help from the Continentals: Try the Tories. Try the line he'd first used to approach Ovlomov: spin the wheel and hear the bell ring. ". . . Sir?"

"Slaughter 1-7-7-7. . . . Hello?"

"I hear you, Sir." Cold, this voice, and smooth as an adder's skin.

"Sir Henry Hamilton? I'm a loyal subject of the King and I have information to sell. . . ." He held his face close to the brazen mouthpiece. By now he had no slightest doubt but that it was all real: he would connive, he would—

"Oh, demn the loyal subjects of the King. I buy no information; I buy *hair,* Sir! *That's* how I make rebels into loyal subjects of the King, Sir! I buy their sculps! Have you some'at to sell, fellow? I pay top prices to encourage the trade—for the sculps of male Yenkees, two-pun-ten—female Yenkees, two-pun-even—infant Yenkees and disaffected Injians, ten shillin."

"Help me—help me get through to where you are—Sir Henry—I'll do—"

The Tory agent's voice grew cautionary. "Though, mind," he said; "mind they be well-cured, for if there's one thing I can*not* abide, d'ye hear, Sir," he said with fastidious distaste, "it's a mouldy stinking sculp. *Fah!*"

"*You* can find out how, some way, there must be a way I can come over—"

The voice grew fainter. *"Hair;* not the whole head: just the *haiiirrr . . .*"

It died away altogether and while Milo watched the name faded from the page.

One after the other he called them up. And one after the other, though they did not know who he really was, they knew at once that he was a rogue and a scoundrel. He could not make them understand, could not find out how to get from his time and place to theirs. Voices traveled it, why not bodies? Desperately he riffled the pages of his compendium. Another name leaped at him. *This* man would not repulse him. He spun the wheel.

"Your conversant, Sir?"

"Tammany 1-7-8-9. And hurry!"

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". . . Servant, Sir." Trrrinnggg . . .

A babble of voices . . . laughter . . . the sound of a fiddler . . .

Milo's voice trembled. "Colonel Aaron Burr?"

The colonel's voice was soft as cream. "That same, Sir."

Lay the cards on the table. "Colonel Burr, I'm a thief, a swindler, a blackmailer, and a traitor."

The colonel chuckled. "Ecawd, but withal an honest knave. . . . Nay, babe, nay, my poppet, don't jump so when I—"

"I need your help. I need it *now!*"

"Ah, not tonight, me lad. Burr might sell his soul for gold, but he'd not move outside the door even to *save* his soul when a pretty wench is on his knee— Why so flushed, my sweet tapstress? Bodice tight? Let me loose it. . . . Nay, don't slap my fingers. You know you love me. . . ."

Was there a single name left in the book? (Only a few minutes to midnight.) Yes. One.

"Your conversant, Sir?" Milo licked dry lips. "West Point 1-7-8-0." This time no silver bell tinkled. Slowly and with abrupt bursts, as if blown by gusts of wind, he heard the sound of a ruffle of drums. . . . A puff of yellow choking sulfurous smoke billowed from the coppery horn. Milo ducked his head.

"I hear you, Sir." The voice was infinitely weary, infinitely bitter.

Milo croaked, "General Benedict Arnold?" And he told the whole story. There was a silence, but he sensed the listener was still there. And finally—

"I *can* help you. Matter *can* pass the barrier of time and place. For the sake of my wounded leg at Saratoga, shattered and bloodied in the service of my native land, I will do my native land this last service." Milo babbled thanks. The bitter, weary voice spoke on. "For my treasons I received money, commissions for myself and sons, a pension for my wife. Dust, all dust and ashes . . . I ask in my will that I be buried in my Continental uniform—"

"But *me,* you said you'd help *me*—" And the clock hands almost—

"I shall do for you what I should have done for myself. My old trade, in Hartford-town, ere I turned to war, I learned—But it's too late now. I should have done it that night at West Point, before I wrote to poor André—" One of the Leyden jars shattered with a sharp crack, splitting the glass panel. He reeled from a blast of heat. Amid the dust and shards he saw a small round box.

"*No!*" he cried, pulling back. The clock began softly to strike the hour. An automobile drove up below, heavy feet tramped the hallway, stopped outside his door.

Without further hesitation he opened the box, thrust something

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into his mouth. He trembled, fell forward, grasping the wheel. The bell tinkled once. The pillbox lay to one side. "Ben.dT Arnold, Hartford," the label said. "Licensed Apotheckary."

Fists beat at the door, feet kicked it, rough voices called out.

The bell tinkled once more in the cabinet.

"Your conversant, Sir?" a voice asked faintly.

It repeated the question.

"I do not hear you, Sir," it said, at length.

"I do not hear you. . . ."

WE'D LIKE TO SUGGEST . . .

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In this persuasive picture of a future American society not quite like any other so far prophesied, Mr. Anderson is at his near-Shavian best in demonstrating that ideological opponents may be, at the same time, both right and both wrong.

The Last of the Deliverers

by POUL ANDERSON

WHEN I WAS NINE YEARS OLD, WE still had a crazy man living in our town. He was very old, almost a hundred I suppose, and all his kin were dead. But in those days every town still had a few people who did not belong to any family.

Uncle Jim was wrong in the head, but harmless. He cobbled for us. His shop was in the front room of his house, always prim and neat, and when you stood there among the good smells of leather and oil, you could see his living room beyond. He did not have many books, but shelf after shelf was loaded with tall bright sheafs cased in plastic—old as himself, and as cracked and yellow with their age. He called them his magazines, and if we children were good he sometimes let us look at the pictures in them, but we had to be very careful. After he was dead I had a chance to read the texts, which didn't make sense. Nobody would worry about the things the people in those magazines made such a fuss over. He also had a big antique television set, though why he kept it when there was nothing to receive but official calls and the town had a perfectly good set for them, I don't know. But he was crazy.

Every morning his long stiff figure went for a walk down Main Street. The Trees there were mostly elms, grown tall enough to overshadow it and speckle the pavement with cool bright sunflecks. Uncle Jim was always dressed in his ancient clothes, no matter how hot the day, and summer in Ohio can get plenty hot. He wore frayed white shirts with scratchy, choky collars, and long trousers and a clumsy kind of jacket, and narrow shoes that pinched his feet. It was ugly, but he kept it painfully clean. We children, being young and therefore cruel, thought at first that because we never saw him unclothed he must be hiding some awful deformity, and teased him

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about it. But my auntsbrother John made us stop, and uncle Jim never held it against us. He even used to give us candy he had made himself, till the town dentist complained; then all of us had solemn talks with our fathers and found out that sugar rots the teeth.

Finally we decided that Uncle Jim—we called him that, without saying on which side he was anyone's uncle, because he wasn't really—wore all those clothes as a sort of background for his button that said WIN WITH WILLARD. He told me once, when I asked, that Willard had been the last Republican President of the United States and a very great man who tried to avert disaster but was too late because the people were already far gone in sloth and decadence. That was a big lading for a nine-year-old head, and I still don't really understand it, except that once the towns did not govern themselves and the country was divided between two big groups who were not even clans but who more or less took turns furnishing a President; and the President was not an umpire between towns and states, but ran everything.

Uncle Jim used to creak down Main Street past Townhall and the sunpower plant, then turn at the fountain and go by my fathergreat-uncle Conrad's house to the edge of town where the fields and Trees rolled to the blue rim of the world. At the airport he would turn and come back by Joseph Arakelian's, where he always looked in at the hand looms and sneered with disgust and talked about automatic machinery; though what he had against the looms I don't know, because Joseph's weavery was famous. He also made harsh remarks about our ratty little airport and the town's half-dozen flitters. That wasn't fair: we had a very good airport, surfaced with concrete blocks ripped out of the old highway, and there were enough flitters for all our longer trips. You'd never get more than six groups going anywhere at any one time in a town this size.

But I wanted to tell about the Communist.

This was in the spring. The snow had melted and the ground begun to dry and our farmers were out planting. The rest of our town bustled with preparations for the Fete, cooking and baking, oh such a smell as filled the air, women trading recipes from porch to porch, artisans hammering and sawing and welding, the washlines afire with Sunday-best clothes taken out of winter chests, lovers hand in hand whispering of the festivals to come. Red and Bob and Stinky and I were playing marbles by the airport. It used to be mumbletypeg, but some of the kids flipped their knives into Trees and the Elders made a rule that no kid could carry a knife unless a grownup was with him.

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So it was a fair sweet morning, the sky a dizzy-high arch of blue, sunlight bouncing off puffy white clouds and down to the earth, and the first pale whisper of green had been breathed across the hills. Dust leaped where our marbles hit, a small wind blew up from the south and slid across my skin and rumpled my hair, the world and the season and we were young.

We were about to quit, fetch our guns and take into the woods after rabbit, when a shadow fell across us and we saw Uncle Jim and my mothercousin Andy. Uncle Jim wore a long coat above all his other clothes, and still shivered as he leaned on his cane, and the shrunken hands were blue with cold. Andy wore a kilt, for the pockets, and sandals. He was our town engineer, a stocky man of forty, but once in the prehistoric past before I was born he had been on an expedition to Mars, and this made him a hero for us kids. We never understood why he was not a swaggering corsair. He owned three thousand books at least, more than twice the average in our town. He spent a lot of time with Uncle Jim too, and I didn't know why. Now I see that he was trying to learn about the past from him, not the dead past mummified in the history books but the people who had once been alive.

The old man looked down at us and said: "You boys aren't wearing a stitch. You'll catch your death of cold." He had a high, thin voice, but it was steady. In all the years alone, he must have learned how to be firm with himself.

"Oh, nonsense," said Andy. "I'll bet it's sixty in the sun."

"We was going after rabbits," I said importantly. "I'll bring mine to your place and your wife can make us a stew." Like all children, I spent as much time with kinfolk as I did with my orthoparents, but I favored Andy's home. His wife was a wonderful cook, his oldest son was better than most on the guitar, and his daughter's chess was just about my speed, neither too good nor too bad.

I'd won most of the marbles this game, so now I gave them back. "When I was a boy," said Uncle Jim, "we played for keeps."

"What happened after the best shooter had won all the marbles in town?" asked Stinky. "It's hard work making a good marble, Uncle Jim. I can't hardly replace all I lose anyway."

"You could have bought some more," he told him. "There were stores where you could buy anything."

"But who made all those marbles?"

"There were factories—"

Imagine that! Big grown men spending their lives making colored glass balls!

We were almost ready to leave when the Communist showed up. We saw him as he rounded the

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clump of Trees at the north quarter-section, which was pasture that year. He was on the Middleton road, and dust scuffed up from his bare feet.

A stranger in town is always big news, and we kids started running to meet him till Andy recalled us with a sharp word and reminded us that he was entitled to proper courtesy. So we waited, with our eyes bugging out, till he reached us.

But this was a woebegone stranger. He was tall and thin, like Uncle Jim, but his cape hung in rags about a narrow chest where you could count all the ribs, and under a bald dome of a head was a dirty white beard down to his waist. He walked heavily, leaning on a staff, heavy as Time, and even then I sensed the loneliness like a weight on his thin shoulders.

Andy stepped forward and bowed. "Greetings and welcome, Freeborn," he said. "I am Andrew Jackson Welles, town engineer, and on behalf of the Folks I bid you stay, rest, and refresh yourself." He didn't just rattle the words off as he would for someone he knew, but declaimed them with great care.

Uncle Jim smiled then, a smile like thawing after a nine year's winter, for this man was as old as himself and born in the same forgotten world. He trod forth and held out his hand. "Hello, sir," he said. "My name is Robbins. Pleased to meet you." They didn't have very good manners in his day.

"Thank you, Comrade Welles, Comrade Robbins," said the stranger. His smile was lost somewhere in that tangled mold of whiskers. "I'm Harry Miller."

"Comrade?" Uncle Jim spoke it slowly, like a word out of a nightmare, and his hand crept back again. "What do you mean?"

The newcome wanderer straightened and looked at us in a way that frightened me. "I meant what I said," he answered. "I don't make any bones about it. Harry Miller, of the Communist Party of the United States of America!"

Uncle Jim sucked in a long breath. "But—" he stammered, "but I thought . . . at the very least, I thought all you rats were dead."

"Now hold on," said Andy. "Your pardon, Freeborn Miller. Our friend isn't, uh, isn't quite himself. Don't take it personally, I beg you."

There was a grimness in Miller's chuckle. "Oh, I don't mind. I've been called worse than that."

"And deserved it!" I had never seen Uncle Jim angry before. His face got red and he stamped his cane in the dust. "Andy, this, this man is a traitor. D'you hear? He's a foreign agent!"

"You mean you come clear from Russia?" murmured Andy, and we boys clustered near with our ears stiff in the breeze, because a foreigner was a seldom sight.

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"No," said Miller. "No, I'm from Pittsburgh. Never been to Russia. Wouldn't want to go. Too awful there—they *had* Communism once."

"Didn't know anybody was left in Pittsburgh," said Andy. "I was there last year with a salvage crew, after steel and copper, and we never saw anything but birds."

"A few. A few. My wife and I—But she died, and I couldn't stay in that rotting empty shell of a city, so I went out on the road."

"And you can go back on the road," snarled Uncle Jim.

"Now, please be quiet," said Andy. "Come on into town, Freeborn Miller—Comrade Miller, if you prefer. May I invite you to stay with me?"

Uncle Jim grabbed Andy's arm. He shook like a dead leaf in fall, under the heartless fall winds. "You can't!" he shrieked. "Don't you see, he'll poison your minds, he'll subvert you, we'll end up slaves to him and his gang of banditsl"

"It seems you've been doing a little mind-poisoning of your own, Mister Robbins," said Miller.

Uncle Jim stood for a moment, head bent to the ground, and the quick tears of an old man glimmered in his eyes. Then he lifted his face and pride rang in the words: "I am a Republican."

"I thought so." The Communist glanced around and nodded to himself. "Typical bourgeois pseudo-culture. Look at those men, each out on his own little tractor in his own field, hugging his own little selfishness to him."

Andy scratched his head. "What are you talking about, Freeborn?" he asked. "Those are town machines. Who wants to be bothered with keeping his own tractor and plow and harvester?"

"Oh . . . you mean—" I could see a light of wonder in the Communist's eyes, and he half stretched out his hands. They were aged hands, I could see the bones just under the dried-out skin. "You mean you *do* work the land collectively?"

"Why, no. What on earth would be the point of that?" replied Andy. "A man's entitled to what he raises himself, isn't he?"

"So the land, which should be the property of all the people, is parceled among those kulaks!" flared Miller.

"How in hell's name can land be anybody's property? It's . . . it's land! You can't put forty acres in your pocket and walk off with them." Andy took a long breath. "You must have been pretty well cut off from things in Pittsburgh—ate the ancient canned stuff, didn't you? I thought so. It's easy enough to explain. Look, that section out there is being planted in corn by my mothercousin Glenn. It's his corn, that he swaps for whatever else he needs. But next year, to conserve the soil, it'll be put in alfalfa, and my sisterson Willy takes

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care of it then. As for garden truck and fruit, most of us raise our own, just to get outdoors each day."

The light faded in our visitor. "It doesn't make sense," said Miller, and I could hear how tired he was. It must have been a long hike from Pittsburgh, living off handouts from gypsies and the Lone Farmers.

"I quite agree," said Uncle Jim with a stiff kind of smile. "In my father's day—" He closed his mouth. I knew his father had died in Korea, in some war when he was just a baby, and Uncle Jim had been left to keep the memory and the sad barren pride of it. I remembered my history, which Freeborn Levinsohn taught in our town because he knew it best, and a shiver crept in my skin. A *Communist!* Why, they had killed and tortured Americans . . . only this was a faded rag of a man, he couldn't kill a puppy. It was very odd.

We started toward Townhall. People saw us and began to crowd around, staring and whispering as much as decorum allowed. I strutted with Red and Bob and Stinky, right next to the stranger, the real live Communist, under the eyes of all the other kids.

We passed Joseph's weavery, and his family and apprentices came out to join the goggle eyes. Miller spat in the street. "I imagine those people are hired!" he said.

"You don't expect them to work for nothing, do you?" asked Andy.

"They should work for the common good."

"But they do. Every time somebody needs a garment or a blanket, Joseph gets his boys together and they make one. You can buy better stuff from him than most women can make at home."

"I knew it. The bourgeois exploiter—"

"I only wish that were the case," said Uncle Jim, tight-lipped.

"You would," snapped Miller.

"But it isn't. People don't have any drive these days. No spirit of competition. No desire to improve their living standard. No . . . they buy what they need, and wear it while it lasts—and it's made to last damn near forever." Uncle Jim waved his cane in the air. "I tell you, Andy, the country's gone to hell. The economy is stagnant. Business has become a bunch of miserable little shops and people making for themselves what they used to buy!"

"I think we're pretty well fed and clothed and housed," said Andy.

"But where's your . . . your drive? Where's the get-up-and-go, the hustling, that made America great? Look—your wife wears the same model of gown her mother wore. You use a flitter that was built in your father's time. Don't you want anything *better?*"

"Our machinery works well enough," said Andy. He spoke in a bored voice, this was an old argu-

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ment to him while the Communist was new. I saw Miller's tattered cape swirl into Si Johansen's carpenter shop and followed.

Si was making a chest of drawers for George Hulme, who was getting married this spring. He put down his tools and answered politely.

"Yes . . . yes, Freeborn . . . sure, I work here. . . . Organize? What *for?* Social-like, you mean? But my apprentices got too damn much social life as it is. Every third day a holiday, damn near. . . No, they *ain't* oppressed. Hell, they're my own kin! . . . But there ain't any people who haven't got good furniture. Not unless they're lousy carpenters and too uppity to get help—"

"But the people all over the world!" screamed Miller. "Don't you have any heart, man? What about the Mexican peons?"

Si Johansen shrugged. "What about them? If they want to run things different down there, it's their own business." He put away his electric sander and hollered to his apprentices that they could have the rest of the day off. They'd have taken it anyway, of course, but Si was a little bit bossy.

Andy got Miller out in the street again, and at Townhall the Mayor came in from the fields and received him. Since good weather was predicted for the whole week, we decided there was no hurry about the planting and we'd spend the afternoon welcoming our guest.

"Bunch of bums!" snorted Uncle Jim. "Your ancestors stuck by a job till it was finished."

"This'll get finished in time," said the Mayor, like he was talking to a baby. "What's the rush, Jim?"

"Rush? To get on with it—finish it and go on to something else. Better things for better living!"

"For the benefit of your exploiters," cackled Miller. He stood on the Townhall steps like a starved and angry rooster.

"What exploiters?" The Mayor was as puzzled as me.

"The . . . the big businessmen, the—"

"There aren't any more businessmen," said Uncle Jim, and a little more life seemed to trickle out of him as he admitted it. "Our shopkeepers . . . no. They only want to make a living. They've never heard of making a profit. They're too lazy to expand."

"Then why haven't you got socialism?" Miller's red eyes glared around as if looking for some hidden enemy. "It's every family for itself. Where's your solidarity?"

"We get along pretty well with each other, Freeborn," said the Mayor. "We got courts to settle any arguments."

"But don't you want to go on, to advance, to—"

"We got enough," declared the Mayor, patting his belly. "I couldn't eat any more than I do."

"But you could wear more!" said

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Uncle Jim. He jittered on the steps, the poor crazy man, dancing before all our eyes like the puppets in a traveling show. "You could have your own car, a new model every year with beautiful chrome plate all over it, and new machines to lighten your labor, and—"

"—and to buy those shoddy things, meant only to wear out, you would have to slave your lives away for the capitalists," said Miller. "The People must produce for the People."

Andy traded a glance with the Mayor. "Look, Freeborns," he said gently, "you don't seem to get the point. We don't *want* all those gadgets. We have enough. It isn't worthwhile scheming and working to get more than we have, not while there are girls to love in springtime and deer to hunt in the fall. And when we do work, we'd rather work for ourselves, not for somebody else, whether you call the somebody else a capitalist or the People. Now let's go sit down and take it easy before lunch."

Wedged between the legs of the Folks, I heard Si Johansen mutter to Joseph Arakelian: "I don't get it. What would we do with all this machinery? If I had some damn machine to make furniture for me, what'd I do with my hands?"

Joseph lifted his shoulders. "Beats me, Si. Personally, I'd go nuts watching two people wear the same identical pattern."

"It might be kind of nice at that," said Red to me. "Having a car like they show in Uncle Jim's ma-ga-zines."

"Where'd you go in it?" asked Bob.

"Gee, I dunno. To Canada, maybe. But shucks, I can go to Canada any time I can talk my dad into borrowing a flitter."

"Sure," said Bob. "And if you're going less than a hundred miles, you got a horse, haven't you? Who wants an old car?"

I wriggled through the crowd toward the Plaza, where the women were setting up outdoor tables and bringing food for a banquet. The crowd was so thick around our guest where he sat that I couldn't get near, but Stinky and I skun up into the Plaza Tree, a huge gray oak, and crawled along a branch till we hung just above his head. It was a bare and liver-spotted head, wobbling on a thread of neck, but he darted it around and spoke shrill.

Andy and the Mayor sat near him, puffing their pipes, and Uncle Jim was there too. The Folks had let him in so they could watch the fireworks. That was perhaps a cruel and thoughtless thing to do, but how could we know? Uncle Jim had always been so peaceful, and we'd never had two crazy men in town.

"I was still young," Comrade Miller was saying, "I was only a boy, and there were still telecasts. I remember how my mother cried,

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when we knew the Soviet Union was dissolved. On that night she made me swear to keep faith, and I have, I have, and now I'm going to show you the truth and not a pack of capitalist lies."

"Whatever did happen to Russia?" wondered Ed Mulligan. He was the town psychiatrist, he'd trained at Menninger clear out in Kansas. "I never would have thought the Communists would let their people go free, not from what I've read of them."

"The Communists were corrupted," said Miller fiercely. "Filthy bourgeois lies and money."

"Now that isn't true," said Uncle Jim. "They simply got corrupt and easygoing of their own accord. Any tyrant will. And so they didn't foresee what changes the new technology would make, they blithely introduced it, and in the course of one generation their Iron Curtain rusted away. Nobody *listened* to them any more."

"Pretty correct, Jim," said Andy. He saw my face among the twigs, and winked at me. "There was some violence, it was more complicated than you think, but that's essentially what happened. Trouble is, you can't seem to realize that it happened in the U.S.A. also."

Miller shook his withered head. "Marx proved that technological advances mean inevitable progress toward socialism," he said. "Oh, the cause has been set back, but the day is coming."

"Why, maybe you're right up to a point," said Andy. "But you see, science and society went beyond that point. Maybe I can give you a simple explanation."

"If you wish," said Miller, grumpy-like.

"Well, I've studied the period. Technology made it possible for a few people and acres to feed the whole country, so there were millions of acres lying idle; you could buy them for peanuts. Meanwhile the cities were over-taxed, underrepresented, and choked by their own traffic. Along came the cheap sunpower unit and the high-capacity accumulator. Those made it possible for a man to supply most of his own wants, not work his heart out for someone else to pay the inflated prices demanded by an economy where every single business was subsidized or protected at the taxpayer's expense. Also, by living in the new way, a man cut down his money income to the point where he had to pay almost no taxes—so he actually lived better on a shorter work week.

"More and more, people tended to drift out and settle in small country communities. They consumed less, so there was a great depression, and that drove still more people out to fend for themselves. By the time big business and organized labor realized what was happening and tried to get laws passed against what they called un-American practices, it was too late;

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nobody was interested. It all happened so gradually, you see . . . but it happened, and I think we're happier now."

"Ridiculous!" said Miller. "Capitalism went bankrupt, as Marx foresaw two hundred years ago, but its vicious influence was still so powerful that instead of advancing to collectivism you went back to being peasants."

"Please," said the Mayor. I could see he was annoyed, and thought that maybe peasants were somebody not Freeborn. "Uh, maybe we can pass the time with a little singing."

Though he had no voice to speak of, courtesy demanded that Miller be asked to perform first. He stood up and quavered out something about a guy named Joe Hill. It had a nice tune, but even a nine-year-old like me knew it was lousy poetics. A childish *a-b-c-b-* scheme of masculine rhymes and not a double metaphor anywhere. Besides, who cares what happened to some little tramp when there are hunting songs and epics about interplanetary explorers to make? I was glad when Andy took over and gave us some music with muscle in it.

Lunch was called, and I slipped down from the Tree and found a seat nearby. Comrade Miller and Uncle Jim glowered at each other across the table, but nothing was said till after the meal, a couple of hours later. People had kind of lost interest in the stranger as they learned he'd spent his life huddled in a dead city, and wandered off for the dancing and games. Andy hung around, not wanting to but because he was Miller's host.

The Communist sighed and got up. "You've been nice to me," he said.

"I thought we were all a bunch of capitalists," sneered Uncle Jim.

"It's man I'm interested in, wherever he is and whatever conditions he has to live under," said Miller.

Uncle Jim lifted his voice with his cane: "Man! You claim to care for man, you who only killed and enslaved him?"

"Oh, come off it, Jim," said Andy. "That was a long time ago. Who cares at this late date?"

"*I* do!" Uncle Jim started crying, but he looked at Miller and walked up to him, stiff-legged, hands clawed. "They killed my father! Men died by the tens of thousands —for an ideal! And you don't care! The whole damn country has lost its guts!"

I stood under the Tree, one hand on the cool rough comfort of its bark. I was a little afraid, because I did not understand. Surely Andy, who had been sent by the United Townships Research Foundation all the long black way to Mars, just to gather knowledge, was no coward. Surely my father, a gentle man and full of laughter, did not lack guts. What was it we were supposed to want?

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"Why, you bootlicking belly-crawling lackey," yelled Miller, "it was you who gutted them! It was you who murdered working men, and roped their sons into your dummy unions, and . . . and . . . what about the Mexican peons?"

Andy tried to come between them. Miller's staff clattered on his head. Andy stepped back, wiping the blood off, looking helpless, as the old crazy men howled at each other. He couldn't use force—he might hurt them.

Perhaps, in that moment, he realized. "It's all right, Freeborns," he said quickly. "It's all right. We'll listen to you. Look, you can have a nice debate tonight, right in Townhall, and we'll all come and—"

He was too late. Uncle Jim and Comrade Miller were already fighting, thin arms locked and dim eyes full of tears because they had no strength left to destroy what they hated. But I think, now, that the hate arose from a baffled love. They both loved us in a queer maimed fashion, and we did not care, we did not care.

Andy got some men together and separated the two and they were led off to different houses for a nap. But when Dr. Simmons looked in on Uncle Jim a few hours later, he was gone. The doctor hurried off to find the Communist, and he was gone too.

I only learned that afterward, since I went off to play tag and pom-pom-pullaway with the other kids down where the river flowed cool and dark. It was in the same river, next morning, that Constable Thompson found the Communist and the Republican. Nobody knew what had happened. They met under the Trees, alone, at dusk when bonfires were being lit and the Elders making merry around them and lovers stealing off into the woods. That's all anybody knows. We gave them a nice funeral.

It was the talk of the town for a week, and in fact the whole state of Ohio heard about it, but then the talk died and the old crazy men were forgotten. That was the year the Brotherhood came into power in the north, and men worried what it could mean. The next spring they learned, and there was an alliance made and war went across the hills. For the Brotherhood gang, just as it had threatened, planted no Trees at all, and such evil cannot go unpunished.

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Mary-Carter Roberts' When Jack Smith Fought Old Satan (*F&SF, July, 1957*) *was, I feel, one of the most distinguished fantasies that we have reprinted. I'm delighted now to introduce the first appearance of a Roberts original—completely different from her Delaware legend in setting, concept, style and tone, and sharing with it only the ability to impart solid conviction to a supernatural narrative. There's a quiet sense of unquestionable reality about this story of the reactions of an ordinary family to a small vast impossibility.*

One Sent

by MARY-CARTER ROBERTS

THE HERNDONS, WHO WERE A FAMily of five living in a two-story brick house on a good, if not the best street in a small city, had a cat they called Plushbottom. He had come to them full-grown, and very willingly, though without any great affection, they had kept him; they cheerfully liked him, but they would not have missed him much if he had gone away. He was nice-looking, being white and orange and always clean. After they had had him several months, Mr. Herndon discovered that he was an angel.

This happened on a summer Sunday morning. Mr. Herndon was standing in his back yard, after having eaten his usual late (nine thirty) Sunday breakfast, and he saw Plushbottom spread a pair of neat and pretty feather wings, rise from the spot where he had been sitting, over by the ash can against the foundation wall, and fly some twenty-five feet to Mrs. Herndon's lilac bush, where he came down expertly on the grass. He was then facing Mr. Herndon and outlined in foreshortened relief against the lilac foliage. Mr. Herndon saw he had a halo too. It was not any thin, penciled-looking ring, floating loose in the air above him. It was a sprouting fan of radiance that went across his head just behind his ears and down the sides of his face to about the ends of his jaws. Plushbottom, back on the ground, settled into a comfortable half-crouch but kept his wings a little raised, as if for the sake of coolness. He did nothing more. He just sat. Mr. Herndon, who owned a garage and machine shop and was called

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Ed by his business associates, assumed that he had lost his mind.

He clenched his teeth. He had a queer taste in his mouth. He was holding one hand in his trouser pocket and he took a fold of the flesh of his thigh between his thumb and forefinger and squeezed with all his might. This was not "pinching himself." It was a reflex action; he was not aware of making it. He next felt as if he were disintegrating and would crumple to the ground. He did not, but he rocked on his feet. It was his wife who saved him.

She had come out with him, meaning to show him her newest plan for developing the back yard —this time a modified application of a diagram published in *House and Garden,* calling for a flagstone walk. She had been waiting for him to finish his cigar, when, she knew, he would be most likely to make promises. Pending the moment, she had wandered off and disappeared—that is, she had gone some thirty steps and so was behind the garage. Returning just after Plushbottom alighted, she was caught full in the eyes by the spectacle of his incredible equipment. She uttered a bubbling moan, ran totteringly to her husband and threw herself on his chest. "Papa, Papa," she gibbered, simply rooting and burrowing with her whole face, "look at the cat! He's got wings!" Mr. Herndon understood then that he had not gone crazy. He did not have himself, suddenly a lunatic, on his hands to deal with. He had a supernatural visitor.

He put his arms around his wife and they stood there, clinging hard together. They were a loving couple, but they had not shared an embrace like that—one frenziedly and necessarily given to excluding terror and affirming their mutuality in defense—since the days of the great depression. They had been bride and groom then, and they had learned within an hour that his job was at an end and the bank where they had deposited their savings, including all their wedding present checks, had failed. Even so early in their marriage, they were "planning to buy" —that was how they had said it, meaning planning to buy a home but holding the intention too manifest to require explicit statement—and they had seen that they could not buy after all, and probably could not even go on paying rent, and their concept of themselves had stood in their minds' eyes, threatened. Then, in this same way, they had clung together. They did not remember the early time now, of course. They remained embraced for a long moment, and Mr. Herndon, while rendering his share of the clasp, kept his gaze fearfully directed over his wife's head at the creature that, up to two minutes before, he had called Plushbottom. It did not return the look.

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It was staring down at the grass a few inches ahead of its nose. Presently it came out of its crouch a little and made a quick dab with a forepaw at the spot it had been watching. A June bug bounced into the air. Plushbottom, or the thing that had been Plushbottom, sat back on his hindquarters and swung. He hit, but not hard enough. The June bug recovered and zoomed away. In horror, Mr. Herndon waited to see if Plushbottom would zoom after it. He did not. He settled down again, this time clear down, letting his belly rest on the earth, only the tips of his forepaws showing beside his bosomy chest, his wings sinking until their feathers touched the grass. The Herndons went on excluding and affirming, and silence hung over the backyard. Another long moment passed. The halo blazed away beneath the bush.

It was that—the halo—that brought Mr. Herndon back to articulateness, if not to poise. "Mama," he said at last, hoarsely, solemnly, "look." And, though she did not want him to, and resisted, seizing fistfuls of his shirt and whimpering, now tearfully, he turned her around to face the thing that, after all, was there. "Look," he said again. "See that light around his head? He's not just got wings. He's got that other too. That means —well—he's an angel." His wife made a hysterical sound, and, feeling himself that the word was as awful as the thing, he amended. "It means he's good," he said. The tension that had held him since his first sight of the mystery departed, and his teeth chattered a little, but he relaxed. "He's good," he repeated. "G-G-God must have sent him. You—well—you know."

They had said it then, had put a name on it and could contemplate it, if no more. Plushbottom was an angel. There remained the matter of coping with him in that identity. There remained, in short, virtually everything.

Before they could assume the responsibility, they tried an alternative, the only one that occurred to them. They could not doubt that the creature under the lilac was, indeed, an angel—not with all those angelic accoutrements to prove it—but maybe he was not also their cat. Not their cheerfully accepted Plushie at all, but some Being Who, for reasons of His own, had adopted Plushie's appearance and then, as Mr. Herndon thought of it, "just flown in." (He could not as yet bring himself to tell Mama that he had actually seen the Being in flight.) The idea, when he proposed it, gave her courage; she dared to take a few steps in the Being's direction. She bent forward then until she was a right angle, she stared hard. She wept afresh. "No, Papa," she whispered, "it's him. See that place on his ear? That little speck?" Mr. Herndon bravely came, looked and nodded.

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He saw the speck. "It's where he had a tick," his wife continued. "I took it off and put mercurochrome on the bite. That's mercurochrome there now. Our mercurochrome. He couldn't get that up in Heaven. The bottle's on the bathroom shelf."

There was silence while Mr. Herndon took in the implications of her opinion: that Heavenly Beings might adopt mortal forms but not mortal achievements, that anything supernatural—as an angel—had to remain in a supernatural condition, and might not assume even the stain left by a human mere improvement on nature . . . was that what she had meant? Or simply what she had said—that the bottle would not have been available? Masculinity inclined Mr. Herndon to argue, but then he had a rapidly passing vision of a Heavenly storeroom stocked with Heavenly disinfectant, which would require Heavenly gauze, which would indicate a Heavenly clinic, Heavenly surgery, Heavenly accidents, Heavenly disease—Heavenly ticks?—and, feeling too much of the outside coming in, he shut his mind. "OK, Mama," he said. "It's Plushie."

They had to tell the family. That would be next. It would be soon too. Already they heard Ed Junior clattering about upstairs. He would be coming down, he would want breakfast. Mama glanced at the door. What were they to do? Go in and leave an angel, one sent by God? It would probably be sacrilegious. Pick the angel up, tuck him under the arm and carry him where he had shown no wish to be? Worse. Call him? Call him "kitty"? Invite him, obviously. Ask him humbly and sincerely if he would care to enter their unworthy house. They stared at one another. Then they heard Ed Junior shouting from within: "Hey Mom!" "You—you—" said Mrs. Herndon desperately, and fled. "Gee," whispered Mr. Herndon, left alone and in a near-extinction of embarrassment.

They told the family finally by bringing them all out and showing them. There were their two children—Junior, aged sixteen, and Baby, the daughter, aged fourteen—and Mrs. Herndon's mother, aged seventy and called Gran. By the time the five of them were assembled, Mr. Herndon was feeling a fearful anxiety about the still wider spread of the news—for instance, to their neighbors who, after all, were separated from them only by a privet hedge. What were *they* going to think? He was saved, though, from dealing with that question at the moment when he had so much else to deal with, saved by Plushbottom himself. He remained under the bush until he had been inspected by everyone, and then spread his wings and flew up to the dining room window and perched on the ledge.

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There he sat, looking perfectly catlike, in spite of . . . everything. Mr. Herndon bounded up the backsteps, ran through the kitchen and plunged into the dining room. He tore the screen out in seconds. Plushbottom entered, jumping, not flying, and walked to the table on which the breakfast dishes remained. He looked up and miaoued. "My God," groaned Mr. Herndon, and then hit himself in the mouth with his fist. "Excuse me. I mean, forgive—uh—" He stopped, feeling his ears burn red.

The others came trooping in and by that time Plushbottom (still afoot) had gone on to the living room. Through what they called the door (though it was not a door at all, but a passage between two bookcases extending out toward one another from opposite walls and used for bric-a-brac), they saw him bound into his favorite chair. Junior and Baby started toward him. Mr. Herndon stopped them. In a lowered voice he said, "I guess he knows we want to talk this over. Need time to—make arrangements. He's giving us our chance. He don't figure to butt in." He broke off, again overcome by the faults of common speech applied to Heavenly visitors. An angel butting in? If Plushbottom had heard him, what would he be thinking?

Junior said, "Gee, Pop, if I hadn't seen him take off, I'd a thought some joker had fixed a harness on him. You could fake those wings that way. But then he wouldn't be able to work them."

"It's the—the—around his head," whispered Baby, waving her hands around her own head, obviously referring to the halo. "That shine. What do you call it, Mom? No joker could fake that."

"They could if they wired him," retorted Junior, though without any real conviction.

"Where would they hide the battery?" demanded Baby, not yielding, so early in the morning, to feminine pity for male illogic, but brash and full of vigor of her own. "There's no place on a cat you could hide a battery, and you know it."

"Underneath," said Junior, now merely dogged.

"He'd tear it off," asserted Baby, and had a triumphant afterthought. "He'd tear a harness off too. You can't tie things on a cat. They won't stand for it. Pooey."

"Listen," said Mr. Herndon, and sat down in his customary place at the head of the table. They all followed suit. And, being seated, they all looked at him. He told them at once to quit their silly gabble about jokes and jokers and pay a little mind. He paused then and began again, observing that they might as well quit talking about cats too. "He's not a cat," he declared grimly. "That's the whole thing of it. Plushbottom's an angel. We may as well face it, now as well as later on."

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Not able to think of another word, he stared at their faces, and, staring, saw a straw to grasp, or grasp at, to save him from what could not be expressed. The kids looked like kids, Mama was—well—Mama, but Gran was set apart by something the others did not have: Gran was old. Her hair was white, she was wrinkled, she was bent. He had known her for many years and he had never thought of her as wise, but still there was that saying—old people sometimes know best. He appealed to her in beseeching hope. "What do *you* think?" he inquired.

"If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I'd never of believed it in this world," Gran answered promptly, and went on for some time to describe her vast amazement. Listening and waiting, he remembered how he and Mama had acted, and took patience and did not let his hope depart. The old lady concluded her oration by handsomely agreeing with him. "I guess you're right about it, Eddie," she announced. "That Plushbottom's an angel, sure enough, though he never did look like anything but a tomcat to me."

"Well, what shall we do?" he asked, feeling the question so clamorous as to be unnecessary, and consequently repeating it. "What do people do that have angels, anyway?"

"It's in the Scriptures," she replied. "I know you young folks don't think much of Bible reading, but up there in my room I read mine, so I know what it says. An angel visited Abraham and he gave him something to eat. A good hot meal, I mean. Not something left over, handed out the back door. He was blessed for it, too."

"What was the blessing?" demanded Baby.

"Abraham?" said Gran in surprise. "Why, he founded the Jewish race."

"Oh," said Baby.

There was a brief silence. Mama broke it suddenly. She wrung her hands, leaned forward to stare, not at her parent but her husband, and cried out with forlorn insistence, "I've been *thinking* about his food! I have, all along, Papa. I *want* to feed him. I really do. But what do you give an—an angel that's a *cat?* Table scraps?" She fell back in her chair despairingly.

"Get him the best," said Mr. Herndon.

"What best?" Mama revived to wail again. "How do I know what angels like to eat? And where can I give it to him? In a saucer on the kitchen floor? That's where I always *have* fed Plushbottom. But now he ought to have the best place. He ought to have the table—the *whole* table. Only—cats don't eat off of tables. Oh, now that he's an angel, I just *don't* see how I can handle his meals!" She wept.

"Gee," said Junior.

"Gran," asked Baby intently,

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"what does it say in the Bible angels *do*? What do they come *for*?"

"They bring glad tidings," answered Gran. "They work miracles. They help you out of trouble."

"Would that mean you had to be in trouble *before* you got one?" Junior asked thoughtfully.

"Paul and Silas, they were in prison," replied Gran, looking very bright and happy. She sat up straight and waited alertly for more questioning. But silence settled around the table.

Mr. Herndon was groping within himself. When he had asked Gran what they ought to do, he had had neither meals nor miracles in mind, but acceptance. Adjustment to a tremendous fact. An angel had come down to them and they should come up to the angel. But, surely, it would be *possible*? There must be some reason—some reason why they, the Herndons, not the Taylors next door, who had a dog, or the Browns at the corner, who kept canaries, got the distinction. The honor, the wonderful, wonderful honor. Could they live up to it? They hadn't as yet; so much was clear to him and he unhesitatingly took the blame. He had gone at it wrong from the very beginning. "I ought to kneeled down when I first saw him," he told himself sadly. "I ought to kneeled right down on the ground, irregardless." He sighed so profoundly that he broke the charmed stillness that had been enwrapping them. His wife, who had been watching his face while he thought and now was getting frightened—not terrified by the supernatural, but lovingly frightened—said in a voice of sudden calm, "Why don't we just leave things go the way they are for a while, Papa? Until we find out what he wants. I expect he'll know how to tell us. After all, he's from up in Heaven." He gave her a grateful look. The conference ended on it.

All the rest of the morning and on into the afternoon, they left things the way they were, waiting for Plushbottom to make his revelation, which meant that they let him have the living room to himself and inclined to go on tiptoe, at least when walking on the first floor. He spent the time sleeping. This was normal; he always slept in the daytime, though not always with such a lack of interruption; his program of slumber on ordinary Sundays would be broken by dumpings to the floor when somebody wanted the chair he had chosen and by hoistings to laps when somebody erratically decided to pet him. So today, though the Herndons changed their rule of behavior, he was merely keeping to custom. He slept, and he slept exactly like a cat, curled into a half-circle, his paws and tail swept all together. He had lifted his wings from his sides on lying down. They stayed so, curved back above him, drooping, relaxed. Only the halo

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did not partake of a soporific quality. It burned around his head as brightly steady as when he had been awake. He was a sight, there on the pride of the Herndon living room, the new lounge chair with the glazed chintz slip covers that Mama had made herself and that none of their friends as yet had been able to tell from those bought at expensive decorator shops.

They were all aware of his slumber, for, though Papa had told them not to spy, they spied. Nobody could keep from taking peeps. Gran was the least guilty. She looked twice at half-hour intervals, and then went upstairs to read her Bible and get primed for more questioning. Mama, who was working in the kitchen, kept making trips to the dining room to fetch and carry. Simply by turning her head on these passages, she could see the lounge-chair and its occupant, and so she took no step out of the true paths of her errands, but the errands themselves were not true. As for the children, they seemed to be staying in Junior's room on the second floor; at least, Mr. Herndon, in his den across the hall from the impromptu sanctum, heard their voices up there, but he knew, without admitting the knowledge, that the sounds were misleading. His offspring, who most of the time descended the stairs with the clatter of avalanches, could, as he was aware, glide with the silence of shadows when they had occasion, and he felt no doubt that they were making occasions today. But he did not go out into the hall to see. He scarcely moved all the long period until the afternoon dinner. He lay back in his armchair and tried to think. That was all.

He must do something, do something, do something. And he could not think of anything that was right. Such was the progress he made. When Mama finally called them to the dining room, he was looking somberly at the conclusion: his headship of the family, very real and also (because he was no tyrant but a man conscious of responsibility) very precious—the reward allowed him for the loss of his freedom, earned and paid in love—had been taken from him. This was the greatest crisis his family had ever had or ever would have, and he had failed to meet it. He had not had a single constructive idea, not one practical plan. The angel had destroyed his identity.

He sat down at the table and became aware first of a silence and then of an imminent communication. He looked at the faces along the board and saw that all of them were alight—eager, even happy. Even very happy. He frowned and looked again. Mama broke the news to him. She was dutifully tentative, but he could see that, whatever their notion was, she took it for granted he would agree.

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She said, "The children have got an idea, Papa. They were telling me about it and I said they'd just have to hear what you had to say. About—" She stopped. Mr. Herndon saw that she was blushing. Plushbottom was obviously embarrassing to her too, by now. She had come so far.

He thought, "So, the children." They had an idea. The kids. Well, yes, and why not? He had failed, as chief of the clan. Gran had failed, as elder counselor. There was that other saying too—out of the mouths of babes and sucklings. Out of their mouths . . . what? Mr. Herndon could not remember ever having heard the proverb completed, but he was sure of its general sense. Children saw straight. Children saw what was really there. He would—oh, by all means—let the children speak.

He turned to Junior. For the first time, he perceived in his son another man, and one young in manhood. He felt the appropriate jealousy. It was more sharp in that it stabbed him at a moment already dedicated in his thinking to his own failure. But—personal emotions, indeed. An angel was in the living room. "Go ahead, son," said Mr. Herndon. "Speak up."

Junior, in delight at the encouragement, looked consciously modest. "Well," he began, "I just thought of a couple of things, Pop. That's all. They're both obvious. One is, this has got to be *handled* right. And that won't be easy, because it's not like anything else anybody ever heard of. Correct?" He put the curt query in a deferential tone and waited for his father's confirmation. Mr. Herndon nodded. Out of the mouths . . . ? Maybe—maybe.

"So I told Baby," Junior resumed, "and we both put it up to Mom—there's these two things. We'll call in a bunch of preachers. That's first. And I mean a big bunch. The top men from all the churches. Get them to draw up a statement that it's not a fake. That'll take it, right from the beginning, out of the class of spiritualists and table-knockers and like them."

He paused and Mrs. Herndon said softly, "Don't let your dinner get cold, dear. Eat while you talk." Junior made a spasmodic stab at his potato, put a morsel into his mouth and swallowed rapidly. He smiled at his mother but returned his attention to his father.

"After that," he declared, "we must *absolutely* refuse all advertising contracts, and we mustn't sign up for any personal appearance tours. That stuff's not in this class. The thing about this is—it's unique."

He paused again, but obviously only for emphasis. He was into the stream of his concept now; he rushed on. "We must keep our aim at the highest," he said with shining eyes, "and never lower it for any inducement, no matter how

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good the offers are. Because, when we get through the first—well—*rush,* with the legitimate channels, I mean—the newsreels, TV, picture magazines (but only the big ones), the book Baby and I will write, and the movie that we'll let only the most topflight artistic producer make—well, *then* we'll set up a sort of church of our own and work miracles. Like in *The Song of Bernadette,* but even better because *our* angel has got wings, he can fly and you can see him. Nothing like it in the whole world! That's first," said Junior, subsiding and dramatizing the subsidence by drawing a long, quiet breath. "I mean the way we'll lead up to it is our first chief consideration. But there's another item too, Pop. A little one, but even more paramount. We'll absolutely have to change his name." Baby gave a brief giggle. "We'll have to do that right here and now," Junior continued, ignoring her. "We can't go ahead with our project, using the name of Plushbottom. I mean, we *can't.* It's already been copyrighted."

It took them quite a while to understand that Mr. Herndon meant his rejection of these plans, and then, as they said with reproach, they simply could not see why.

He carried out his own plan that evening, for by evening he had one. He went alone into the living room and knelt before the sleeping angel. He said, "I'm sorry." He tried to say then, "Forgive me," but the curious phrase was too much for him. He repeated, "I'm sorry," and added, "I sure am, Plushie, old boy, I sure am." Then he picked up the unmoving figure, taking it around the body, using care not to touch the Heavenly wings, using great and dreadful care not to pass his hands through the Heavenly light. He carried Plushbottom out of the house to the garage and set him on the front seat of the car. All the time, Plushbottom felt and behaved exactly like a cat.

He was warm and fluid when lifted, he tightened a little while being carried, and, on being set down after so long a sleep, he stretched, arching his back, opening his mouth very wide, obviously not to yawn but to extend the stretch to the muscles of his jaws, stretching his wings too, Mr. Herndon saw, feather after feather. Then he sat down, at first erect but, apparently for the sake of better balance, changing to a crouch when Mr. Herndon put the car in motion.

Mr. Herndon drove to the best place he knew. It was the summit of a fairly high hill, some miles beyond the town. There was a view there—the long river coming down its winding valley and broad tracts of woods on the slopes with faraway, gentle-looking farms dotted thinly among them. A view Mr. Herndon was fond of. The

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road did not go to the hilltop; it only wound over the shoulder; so he climbed the last hundred yards afoot. He carried the angel in his hands, holding them out before him. The halo, he saw, shone in the dark, but faintly.

The ground on the crest was cleared of trees and grown over with high grass. Mr. Herndon trampled over a space about two feet square until he had made the verdure on it lie flat. He set Plushbottom down there. He stood before him and bared his head. He said again, "I'm sorry," but this time he added the only term of respect that was in the least familiar to him. He said, "sir." His tone was gravely formal. And, if Plushbottom had replied, had spoken in a human voice, or any understandable voice, or had flown up to Mr. Herndon's level and looked him in the eye, or had done anything—anything at all, except just be—Mr. Herndon, as he bitterly realized, could or might have made the response, felt the ecstasy and given rein to it, done his unimaginable part. Prostrated himself. Struck his forehead on the ground. Danced. Sung. Lacerated his flesh. Praised God. Whatever it was. He might have. But Plushbottom remained himself, a small vast impossibility, pure-eyes and inquiring. Mr. Herndon said, "Goodby," and turned and strode down the hill.

He told himself, when he reached the car, that his was the only family he had ever heard of that had an angel visitor and put the visitor out of doors. But then, his was the only family he had ever heard of that had an angel visitor. Period, thought Mr. Herndon, period.

Curved Universe

What if a star, half dead,
Could meet its youth—
Blue-flamed, electric—hurtling toward the red
Diminished matter that is now its truth?
This bubble—space—
Could hold
That mirror-trick of time, that face-to-face.
There was a heart pollened with April gold.
Let me not find it—now that I am old.

DORIS P. BUCK

(Originally appeared in Pegasus XIV, 1955)

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Recommended Reading

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

IF YOUR BUDGET ALLOWS FOR THE purchase of only one of the science fiction books published during the past year, that one should be FAMOUS SCIENCE-FICTION STORIES, edited by Raymond J. Healy and J. Francis McComas (Modern Library, $2.95).

This is a retitling of the classic 1946 anthology, ADVENTURES IN TIME AND SPACE, with the complete original text (recent printings of the Random House edition have been somewhat abridged) containing 33 stories, 2 articles and a total of almost half a million words. And there's a completely new introduction, taking a fresh look, from the vantagepoint of 1957, at these stories garnered a dozen years ago.

The introduction is largely a warm and highly deserved tribute to John W. Campbell, Jr.—as is meet, since 32 of the 35 entries first appeared in *Astounding*. And what entries they are! Asimov, Bester, Cartmill, Heinlein, Stuart, van Vogt . . . all with stories as good as anything they have ever written. No other anthology contains so great a number of the undisputable masterpieces of s.f. (Note on our inflated economy: Today this hardcover reprint of over a thousand pages seems a sensational bargain at $2.95 . . . which was, in 1946, the not particularly startling price of the original edition!)

Other important reprints include the two all-time epitomes of fantasy-terror, as influential and imitated as anything ever written in the field: Mary Shelley's FRANKENSTEIN (1818; Pyramid, 35¢) and Bram Stoker's DRACULA (1897; Permabooks, 35¢). More recent, but almost as influentially symbol-fixing, is James Hilton's LOST HORIZON (1933; Morrow, $3). Among contemporary reprints, Robert A. Heinlein's DOUBLE STAR (1956; Signet, 35¢) stands out; and George O. Smith's HELLFLOWER (1953; Pyramid, 35¢) and Murray Leinster's PLANET EXPLORER (Avon, 35¢), which appeared earlier in the year as COLONIAL SURVEY, are interesting and readable.

New s.f.: C. L. Moore's DOOMSDAY MORNING (Doubleday, $2.95) tells of the early Twenty-first Century, when America is stifled by the ubiquitous power of Comus (Communications, U.S.), a government bureau amalgamating show business, publishing, teaching and every other form of communication. As part of a Comus plan to trap certain dangerous Cali-

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fornia rebels, a drunken ex-star gets his chance at a comeback in the live theater, touring small mountain towns with a play which is more than it seems to be, and finds himself in a three-way conflict of his personal ambitions and the counterplots of government and rebels. I'm not quite persuaded that the ultimate resolution of these conflicts is satisfactory, or that the story needed almost 100,000 words for its telling; but Miss Moore manages to combine skilfully an action thriller and a story of character, and writes as ably as we always expect of her, under the name of Moore or Kuttner or Padgett or any other.

The surprise twist to Manly Wade Wellman's TWICE IN TIME (Avalon, $2.75) may have been sensational when the story appeared in *Startling* almost 18 years ago; by now it's tired and obvious. But if the book is disappointing as a novel of time travel, it's a great deal of fun as a swashbuckling adventure story of Florence in the Quattrocento. Even more acceptable lightweight entertainment is George O. Smith's TROUBLED STAR (Avalon, $2.75), also from *Startling* (1953). Alien ambassadors accept TV's Space Patrol as real; and its poor star suddenly find himself negotiating for the future of humanity and even piloting an actual spaceship across the lightyears. It's a refreshingly lighthearted yarn, if a bit too brief and hasty.

It should be noted for completists that Ayn Rand's bestselling ATLAS SHRUGGED (Random, $6.95) is s.f., about a future America paralyzed by a strike of "creative" individuals, such as inventors and financiers. I'll confess openly that it will not be reviewed here; Miss Rand and I differ radically on so many issues of basic philosophy that neither she nor I could benefit by my reading 1,168 pages, 645,000 words. At that, I could almost have consumed the Rand mega-novel instead of reading the many worthless novels of the past month or two, here listed to clear my files and (I hope) to keep you from similarly wasting your reading hours: MACH 1: A STORY OF PLANET IONUS, by Allen A. Adler (Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, $3); CITY UNDER THE SEA, by Kenneth Bulmer (Ace, 35¢); OCCAM'S RAZOR, by David Duncan (Ballantine, 35¢); SPAWN OF THE VORTEX, by Henry K. Gayle (Comet, $3); and SPACE STATION 1, by Frank Belknap Long (Ace, 35¢).

The Ace Double-Book containing the last is, however, worth buying for its reprint of A. E. van Vogt's EMPIRE OF THE ATOM. The original publishers of this book, in an access of unreason unique in my decade and a half of professional bookreviewing, forbade me to review it; but I may now say that this story, adapted from the "Clane" series in *Astounding* 1946-1947, is van Vogt's most successful complex of intrigue and action out-

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side of the "Weapon Shops" cycle—intricate and exciting, if never strictly credible. (Oklahoma's celebration of its fiftieth anniversary of statehood has, as you may have observed on postage stamps, the theme of "Arrows to Atoms." I am always a bit baffled when, as here, they occur together as integral parts of the same civilization, when soldiers land from spaceships and start throwing spears. . . .)

Shorter s.f. includes collections by two writers familiar to F&SF readers: Robert Sheckley's PILGRIMAGE TO EARTH (Bantam, 35¢) and Philip K. Dick's THE VARIABLE MAN (Ace, 35¢). "Variable" is the word for both volumes. Sheckley's 15 stories, chiefly from *Galaxy* 1954-1956, are all new to book form, and most welcome for their author's enviably unfailing grace, ease and smoothness; but too many of them rely purely on gimmick-notions, with no development of either science or character, and the gimmicks themselves are apt to be developed with faulty logic or even flat self-contradiction. It's an amusing book, but well below Sheckley's two previous collections. The Dick book contains the title novella and 5 novelets (one previously anthologized). It seems probable that the medium length is least suited to Dick's talents: both his short stories (which have been collected in England, but not here) and his full-length novels are more individual and impressive. But though there are awkwardnesses and confusions in these fairly-long stories, you'll also find fertile ingenuity and a striking power in the use of evocative symbols.

Teen-age s.f.: Isaac Asimov is having himself a blast with his Lucky Starr series (by "Paul French"), now that he has abandoned its earlier Masked Space Ranger nonsense for straightforward interplanetary adventure-detection. LUCKY STARR AND THE MOONS OF JUPITER (Doubleday, $2.75) is one of the best, with a grand fair-play-deduction switch on the which-human-is-the-android? puzzle. Robert A. Heinlein's CITIZEN OF THE GALAXY (Scribner's, $2.95), recently serialized in *Astounding,* is the long, somewhat sprawling novel of a boy's growing up through various facets of a galactic civilization: an underworld of thieves and beggars, a freetrading family-spaceship, the Hegemony Guard, and ultimately the world of interstellar high finance. The incomparable Heinleinesque creation of solidly convincing detail makes Thorby's rise absorbingly real; but an uncomfortable feeling persists that each aspect of the story has been told (if usually less well) before.

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Charles L. Fontenay usually writes sober, detailed science fiction; but "occasionally," he says, "I get a fantasy idea." As a man fond of sleep, I should hate to get many ideas as nightmarish as this one.

A Summer Afternoon

by CHARLES L. FONTENAY

WHEN UNCLE THEO CAME HOME with a bullet in him, Peter thought he was a greater man than ever.

Peter's father put an arm around Uncle Theo's shoulders to help him to the bedroom, while Peter's mother ran to the kitchen to heat some water. Uncle Theo was a big man, and Peter's father had difficulty holding him up when he staggered.

"I'll go for the doctor, Theo," said Peter's father.

"No!" gasped Uncle Theo and there was a trace of his usual bull-like roar even in his weak voice. "That damn doctor's an old woman, Jim. Bring him here and the whole county'd know all about it by morning."

A drop of bright blood from his side splashed on the door sill and spread, darkening as it soaked into the wood. The two men disappeared into the bedroom.

Peter approached the hall table slowly, with awe, as a savage approaches the shrine of a powerful god. On it lay the pistol, where Uncle Theo had tossed it with a clatter when he stumbled in the front door.

Carefully, Peter picked up the weapon. It had been fired. He could smell the acrid aroma of burned powder. He laid it down, softly.

"Stay away from that gun, Peter," said his father sharply, emerging from the bedroom. "And help your mother. I'm going for the doctor."

"Uncle Theo said he didn't want a doctor," Peter reminded him.

"Theo's in no condition to make a decision," said his father, and started for the stairs. Peter waited until he heard his father's footsteps clump all the way upstairs and down the upstairs hall. Then he went to the door of Uncle Theo's bedroom and pushed it open.

His father had helped Uncle Theo lie down on the bed and

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had taken his shirt off, but Uncle Theo wasn't going to stay on the bed. He was sitting on the edge of it, his shoulders drooping, a wet, red stain on his undershirt just above his belt.

"Help me to the chair, Peter," said Uncle Theo.

Peter went to him, and Uncle Theo put a big hand on the boy's shoulder. Peter's knees nearly buckled as Uncle Theo tried three times to get up. But at last he made it and, leaning heavily on Peter, half fell across the intervening space to the platform rocker. He collapsed into it and sat there, breathing heavily, propping himself erect by his elbows, gazing out the window into the summer afternoon.

Peter was ten. He wanted to be like Uncle Theo. And he knew, with that boy's instinct, that his parents didn't want him to be like Uncle Theo but didn't know how to tell him they didn't.

There was that conversation he had overheard one night, when his father and Uncle Theo had been sitting on the front porch and Peter had climbed out of his bedroom window and perched in the concealing foliage of the nearby maple tree.

"Theo, you know you ought not to come here," Jim had said that night. "Think of the boy."

"Nonsense, the boy's too young to know about such things," Uncle Theo had answered heartily. "This farm's a perfect place for me to stay. Nobody would suspect Jim Britton's brother of anything."

"What if I make them suspect?" suggested Jim. "Blood carries only so far, and I have my family to think of."

"I don't think you will, Jim." Uncle Theo laughed, and there was a hard note to his laugh. "I wouldn't stay caught, you know."

So Uncle Theo stayed around the farm, and smoked his big calabash pipe, and told Peter stories about the Old West, and sometimes helped Jim with the planting and harvesting. Then he would go away and be gone for a few days, and Peter's father and mother would look worried and depressed until Uncle Theo strode briskly through the front door again, laughing and joking. He would always bring back something for Peter—a knife, a watch, perhaps a new-minted silver dollar.

Peter thought Uncle Theo was a great man, and he wanted to be just like him.

He hoped now that Uncle Theo wasn't hurt badly. Surely he wasn't. Uncle Theo was so big and strong.

He looked at Uncle Theo, and his heart jumped in fright.

Uncle Theo was sitting very still in the platform rocker, his elbows propping him up straight, looking out the window. But there was no movement to him. His eyes didn't even blink, and Peter could not

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see the rise and fall of his chest.

Peter ran from the bedroom, wanting to cry, "Father, I think Uncle Theo's dead!" But, though he opened his mouth, no words came. He could not speak.

In the hall, he stopped suddenly. His father was halfway downstairs, one foot poised to take the next step. But, like Uncle Theo, he was frozen. His eyes stared ahead, unblinkingly, his hand reached for the stair rail without ever quite touching it.

Peter turned. His mother was emerging from the kitchen, with the kettle in her hand. She, too, stood there in mid-stride, her eyes staring straight ahead, not moving.

All of them—his father, his mother, Uncle Theo—were like wax statues.

The most horrible thing about it to Peter was that, in that rigid tableau of non-movement, the steam rose slowly from the spout of the teakettle, wavering and dissipating. Its faint hiss reverberated in the quiet hall, loudly.

Through the windows that looked out on the side porch, there was a strange quality to the afternoon sunlight.

Frightened, Peter ran through the dining room and out the kitchen door.

Outdoors, the peculiar cast of the light was even more pronounced. The sun shone in a clear sky over the sweetgum trees of the woodlot, but there was something about the atmosphere . . . as though a slightly saffron veil had been cast between earth and heaven.

And in the midst of this strangeness was silence. There was no song of birds, no chirp of insects. Peter never had realized before how many little noises there were, just at the fringe of consciousness. Now there were no noises.

The white chickens pecked at the grass in the back yard, but they pecked silently. No hen clucked. They raised their curving necks to look at him with bright eyes as he passed them and climbed the fence to the barnyard.

Peter walked across the rough dirt of the barnyard on bare feet. The cows chewed their cuds without noise, they switched their tails slowly, they watched him. Their eyes were sentient, they were aware of him as they never had been before. They knew now, as they did not usually, that he was Peter.

He reached the big door to the hall of the barn, when a movement at the corner of the barn caught his eye. He stopped.

A little figure edged around the corner of the barn. It was small, small as a child. But it was stooped and dry and incredibly wrinkled. Like a mummy.

Peter saw it with a horrible clarity, a thing that should not be seen. It was gray-brown against the whitewashed barn.

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It stopped there and looked straight at him with bright, vicious eyes that had no lids and no brows. Its lipless mouth opened, and its teeth were sharp and white, like rat's teeth.

Peter turned and fled around the barn. He did not run to the house, but ducked behind the woodpile at the edge of the barnyard.

After a moment, he peered over the edge of the pile of short logs. The wizened creature was moving across the barnyard toward the house in a shuffling lope. Behind it, from the other side of the barn, came another, and another, and another. Four of them.

The cows did not move as the things passed, but stood chewing their cuds. One of the cows seemed to be looking toward the woodpile with wise eyes.

The creatures swarmed through and over the board fence, and scuttled across the grass-patched back yard. They disappeared into the kitchen.

Peter thought helplessly of his mother and father, standing frozen in the house. But the strength seemed to have left him. He could not move from his place of safety behind the woodpile.

The sky seemed to have darkened even more, yet there were no clouds. The sun seemed dimmed.

In a moment, the four creatures emerged, all in a bunch, from the kitchen. Two of them were carrying something between them now.

It was a wispy, immaterial something, white, with great wings . . . like a giant moth. It beat its wings frantically, trying to escape from its captors, but they held it tight as they scurried across the kitchen yard and over the fence into the barnyard.

In the great silence that gripped the world, there was a terrible thin keening that Peter knew came from the mothlike thing. In a shriek that was a whisper at the very top of audibility, it cried, *"No . . . no . . . no . . ."*

There was a dreadful familiarity about it.

The four withered creatures and their captive vanished around the barn. Peter's paralysis was broken suddenly, and he ran across the barnyard. He climbed the fence and crossed the back yard, past the white chickens.

He ran into the kitchen, through the dining room, into the hall.

For just an instant he saw his father and mother frozen there as he had left them. Then the strange quality was gone from the atmosphere all at once, and his father came stomping down the stairs, pulling on his jacket, and his mother moved down the hall toward Uncle Theo's bedroom, carrying the steaming teakettle.

His father took his hat from the halltree. His mother went into the bedroom. A moment later she reappeared, without the kettle.

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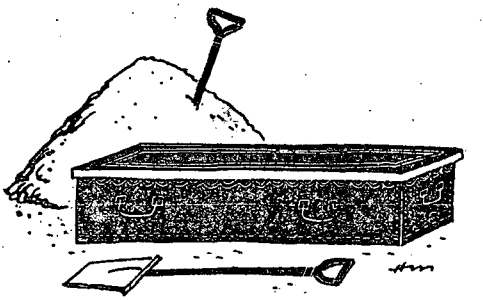
"No use going, Jim," she said quietly. "Theo's dead."

And Peter remembered the high keening of the mothlike creature as it was carried away behind the barn.

Suddenly he flung himself at his mother, sobbing. He grasped her around the waist, tightly, hugging her close, his head on her breast.

"I won't be like Uncle Theo!" he cried hysterically. "I won't! I won't!"

WE'VE FOUND SOMETHING FINE . . .



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Despite the differing lengths of their by-lines, old pro Ed Emsh and new pro Carol Emshwiller are husband and wife. Up until now, their professional careers have followed separate courses; but when Mrs. E. wrote a story of particular visual appeal, Mr. E. seemed the obvious artist from whom to commission a cover. It's a fitting coincidence that this object of marital collaboration should be called

Baby

by CAROL EMSHWILLER

THEY CALLED HIM BABY. HE WAS six feet tall, lean, and had the look of a hungry hunting animal, but the robots called him Baby.

Soneone had once written in a neat script in a tome and on a white paper the carefully chosen name, Christopher John Correy, but there was no one left who could say that this particular name on this particular paper and in this particular book was the name of the man called Baby by robots.

Until a few years ago the city had had all the food it takes to make a man full grown and to keep him sleek and healthy, but now Baby's hip bones jutted forward from a concave stomach, his ribs arched above, and the strong muscles lay just beneath the skin and showed in lined bunches when he moved.

He stood naked in the dining room, damp bare feet on the smooth black tile. He shut his eyes tight and said in a whisper, "Please, please and please, be meat." Then he swallowed the saliva that came at the thought of food. He chewed on nothing and waited, hoping, but not expecting. "I said please," he whispered.

There was no one in the room but him and he watched with fox eyes on the kitchen door until it opened and a model B maid came in. The soup plates on her tray top held only brown powder. House 76 had lost its water pipes in the last freeze of the season because the heat had gone out.

But Baby hadn't come for soup. Sometimes 76 had meat and if not meat, usually an edible desert. Baby was hungry enough for anything at all.

The model B put a soup plate in

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front of each empty chair around the table, and then it waited by the kitchen door, and Baby waited, and after a time the model B took the plates away. The next course *was* meat, or had been, but something had gone wrong and the roast was burned to a dry black lump.

The Please is fooling me, Baby thought. It wants to make me angry.

The meat was impossible to eat, but the model B cut it with knife fingers, not noticing how the black flaked off and fell to the floor. It served each plate with the dark, woody chunks and also with something unrecognizable, an overcooked or spoiled vegetable or perhaps a moldy salad. Then it waited again and after a while took the untouched plates away and came in with the dessert, chocolate pie with whipped cream. A dairy still came to 76 and with milk from one of the underground farms where the robots still tended cows. And the stove had timed just right this time.

Baby glanced out the glass wall behind him. "Overseer, Rob 10, please not be there now, please." He shut his eyes and whispered it. Then he moved fast, reaching under model B's knives just before they came down to split the pie. Model B didn't even notice its knives cut nothing. It was a poor automatic thing on a track and it had no eye. The stove ran it, adjusting it for each task as it loaded the tray. But overseer Rob was like the maid. His eye flickered red, observant, and his legs telescoped at the knees and could run faster than Baby.

Baby ran across the hall balancing the pie. The walls at the end, still working smoothly, lifted to let him out into the back yard. 76's walls were not discriminating anymore. They had opened and closed for Baby for a number of years now.

"Overseer, Rob 10, please not be there now, please."

The overseer wasn't.

Baby climbed the artificial hill at the back of the house at a crouching run, and pushed through the overgrown hedge into the neglected yard of the house that had lost its overseer six years ago. He flopped down on his stomach behind the young trees and bushes. He pushed out his lips and sucked at the whipped cream on the top of the pie, not caring about the long scratches the hedge had made across his body.

He would not have much time, here, so close to his own home, so he concentrated on eating rapidly and without relish. This was something just to fill his stomach. He was hungry now for meat or milk.

He was losing faith in Please. It didn't work as often as it used to. And he was losing faith in Nursie too, but she could still catch him when he was close to his home like this. In spite of how she was

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now, her arms were still long enough, and her eye still saw. She was slower, but not too slow. She was strong, broad-bottomed with a caterpiller tread and she could still lift him. He was only really safe from her a couple of miles or so from his house. And even then it was usually only a matter of time for her to find him. Now he was behind 75 and his own home was just next door.

"Baby, Baby. Come to Nursie, you scallywag."

Baby raised his head, mouth dripping chocolate, smears on nose and cheeks. He leaned over the pie like an animal over a fresh kill, wary and challenging.

"Baby, come to Nursie. It's time for your nap. Don't make Nursie hunt all over, that's a good Baby. I've milk and cookies."

I'd take a nap for milk and cookies, Baby thought, but the glass is always empty now and the cookies, when there are any, aren't fit to eat. He bent to the pie again. His teeth scraped on the pan as he bit at the crust, tearing at it dog-like.

He couldn't get away now. She would find him and catch him, and take the pie away if he didn't finish it fast. Pies are not for little babies, she would say.

There was silence while she circled, slowly scanning, and he wolfed the last of the crust. At the half circle she caught the warmth, and with a wheeze, scratch, scratch, wheeze, scratch, scratch, she came after him. She sounded slower than she was. Baby didn't try to get away. In a moment one of her long flexible arms reached out into the bushes and took him about the waist gently but firmly. He yielded to the pull, stood up and walked towards Nursie, leaning on her soft arm. He hadn't tried to fight her for a long time now. It had always been useless.

"There's a good boy. Here's milk and cookies, and then we'll pop into bed for a nap." She put the empty sip-glass into his hand. "Baby do it all by himself."

"There *is* no milk for Baby here. You never have milk for me anymore."

"Yes, it's there. I got it from the dairy box just now. The milk-robs came, early, early, while you were still asleep, and they brought this good milk just for Baby."

A feeling came over him like getting into a warm bath only the warmth flowed inside him. For a moment he could say nothing at all, and then he said, "Where's my milk," in a whisper. His arm muscles tightened and he clenched his fists against his stomach.

There was something wrong with him lately, and it was getting worse. Something that knawed at him and knotted his stomach like this. A great need, overpowering, for an unknown thing. It drove him to far wanderings about the city, to taking stupid risks, to fits of

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running after nothing in the empty streets, to staring at the sky, sometimes to a wild howling, and to climbing, climbing dizzily and trembling on narrow perches about the high buildings.

"Where's my milk?" He screamed it this time. "Ask Rob 6 if there is milk there." The overseer will tell her and *then* she will doubt. She will no longer believe in Please nor in Central, and because she is so sure, her doubt will be devastating. He would see her fall on the ground and scream with horror of her lost belief.

"Come, drink it up," she said.

"Central is stopped! There is no Please!" he shouted.

Both soft mother-arms came out to embrace him. There was a place, a specially built place at her breast (or what stood for breast) to cradle a baby or pillow a young head, but it was too low for him now even when he knelt. Still, she pulled him to her.

"Don't worry, Baby. Don't cry. There's always milk for Baby. As much as you want. Come along and we'll get some more."

"There isn't any milk." He was calm suddenly. "Please ask Rob 6. I said, please. Now ask Rob 6, please."

"Such a good, polite boy. All right, we'll ask Rob 6 if you want. Yes. You said please, didn't you. Yes you did."

There was a time a long time ago when Baby always answered eagerly and proudly, "Yes, I did, didn't I," but now he said nothing, his face as expressionless as Nursie's flat tray of features always was.

She took his strong hand, calloused from climbing, and led him across his own neat lawn to his home. The front wall panel rose to let them in as they neared.

Nursie stopped just inside, and Baby knew she was scanning for Rob 6. Maybe she was even talking to him in the silent way they had that Baby could never hear. A long time ago he had felt for the first time the fierce frustration of not hearing. Even though the discovery of it had come gradually, the understanding came all at once. It was as if he "knew" they were doing it long before he "realized" it. That day a feeling like the one he had now had washed over him in a hot flush. They're hard and hurt-proof, and I'm soft; they're strong with long changeable arms, and I'm weak and only one shape; and now they talk together and I can't hear it. My Nursie talks silently to that Rob 6.

That day of realization he had gone down to the high buildings where the statue was, tall to the third window of one of them, and he had climbed all the way to the top of the white head for the first time. He scraped his thumb on the way up. He remembered the blood smearing the fleshy part of his hand, and the drops making three red lines down his arm.

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At the top he had shouted, "I wish to be Rob 6." He sat right on the big head with a foot on each ear, drunk with height. "I don't want to be Baby anymore. I must be more than I am. Please, please, please, and please. Baby said please."

He had looked at the hot summer sun and shouted, "I say please twice to the sun in the sky," and then he turned towards Central, "and four times to Central." He liked the sun best, but he knew Central was more powerful. He smeared the blood from his hand across the white statue head and shut his eyes tight. I am getting hard and strong, he thought. I have one eye here in the center and it flickers red. He could feel his two eyes merging slowly to just above his nose. My arms are interchangeable, and if I jump I will land on rubber feet and my knees will spring, one section up into the other, and I won't be hurt. I am Rob number one thousand and twenty-six. I am changed.

And he had jumped then.

It took Nursie almost a whole day to find him. "You naughty boy. You naughty, naughty boy, to go so far from home." She carried him back gently and called the Rob-Doc, and Baby had lain in bed a long time after that. She had been happy with him for being a good boy all that time, but he had cried each night with pain and frustration, and he had wondered, since he couldn't be Rob 6, when he would be at least a man, whatever that was. Nursie always just said, sometime.

And now he would try to hurt her as he had hurt then, inside, and as he hurt now with an unknown need.

She started off, after the few seconds' wait at the door, pulling Baby along after her. Her broad caterpillar tread easily mounted the stone steps behind the huge carefully rustic fireplace. She crossed, in rubbery silence, the metal-tiled hallway while Baby pad-padded behind her, leaving dirty damp outlines of his feet on the spotless floor. They crossed the kitchen by the center ramp and entered the door to the brain center of house 74.

The room was large and filled with wires and pipes and conveyer belts, but the main control unit was small. The thing that ran everything in the house including this maze of crisscrossing wires and pipes, was bread-box size. Rob 6 stood before it, propped back on his third leg, the one he used for balance when walking and as a prop when standing still. He wore his mechanic hands and had plugged himself into one side of the control unit by a long flexible thumb.

"There is something wrong," Rob 6 said, "but it is not here. Control is fine."

"Baby says there is no milk," Nursie said, "but I heard the milk-

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robs come this morning. Baby is fooling Nursie again. He fools and fools. And, Rob 6, Baby is getting so big. *Such* a big boy. Too big for Nursie. Or do I need to be fixed too? Will you check, Robby 6?"

"You are thirty-eight years old. You should have been replaced."

"We make do with what we have. Yes we do." She chanted it as if she were reciting a nursery rhyme. "But *now*, Robby 6, *is* there milk in the dairy box for Baby?"

"I doubt it."

"I don't understand. I don't understand at all. There is *always* milk in the dairy box at seven twenty-three."

"Things are not going right and they are getting worse. There is something wrong with 74 now, but Control is fine. Library did not send a tape with motor repair information. I dialed and none came. And I asked and Central did not answer."

"That's too bad, *too* bad," Nursie chanted, and then she said, "But if at first you don't succeed, try, try again," and, "Things will be better tomorrow."

"Not without human beings."

"They'll come back. Mommy and Daddy will come back *later*."

"Nurse 16, you helped to bury them yourself after the enemy seeded the sickness."

"Why Rob 6! And in front of Baby too! He understands things now, you know."

Baby squatted down, flat-footed, on the metal-grilled floor of the control room. Rob 6 and Nursie never used chairs and neither did he since he'd outgrown his highchair. "He's only said it a thousand times already," he muttered, sullen faced, carefully not looking at them.

It wasn't going to happen now either, nor ever. No matter what he said or did, Nursie would be the same. She would never know anything she didn't already know now. Her eye looks at me, but she doesn't really see me at all, he thought. If I were gone or even stopped like some of the robots, she would say only, "He's coming back *later*," like she says over and over about Mommy and Daddy and Jeannie. She sees my shape, but not me. I am a nothing thing to her, but *she* is less than that even.

"Baby was inside Nursie then," Nursie said. "That was a long time ago and you were just a little scallywag."

"You're just a nothing," Baby said.

"Hush, dear. That's not very polite. You know, I kept you inside me a whole extra year like your Mommy and Daddy said and when you came out you were just as safe as can be, and now you're growing up to be a little gentleman just like Mommy and Daddy wanted you to be."

Baby breathed out loudly and hunched lower over his knees. She will *not* change and she will *never*

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see me. "You're both just nothings," he said, "and there is no Central and no Please at all."

"What a thing to say," Nursie said.

"Ask, then—ask Central and Library. Ask *them* why there is no milk anymore."

Rob 6 and Nursie stood silent. They're asking, Baby thought, feeling an unbearable irritation. Rob 6, even, is asking Central and he knows it doesn't answer.

"Central doesn't answer," Rob 6 said.

Suddenly Baby found it difficult to breath. Squatting over his knees was too cramping and he stood up. "Central *never* answers anymore." His voice sounded different to him, low and tense. "Yesterday and yesterday and yesterday before that, a long time before even, it didn't answer, but you keep asking and asking."

"It is right to ask Central first," Rob 6 said.

"Of course it is," Nursie said. "You know that, yes you do. Always ask Central *first*. It will tell you what to do *next*."

He began to tremble and he felt a hot knot swell in his stomach. Part of him seemed to stand apart and ask, what's wrong lately? Rob 6 and Nursie are not so different than they used to be.

He remembered a time when they had seemed enough in every way, observant enough, intelligent enough, loving enough, but that was a long time ago, and he had changed somehow and he was changing even more. Now he was full of unreasonable, uncontrollable angry feelings.

He kept his eyes carefully off Nursie. He felt he would burst if he looked at her empty, wide eye. "Rob 6," he spoke slowly, "Central will never answer . . . *never answer* anymore. What are you going to do about it?"

Rob 6 stood silent. Is he asking again, Baby wondered? Is he asking Central what will he do now that Central is out?

Suddenly it was too much. The swelling hot knot inside him burst and he was shouting. "This is the end of it. I will not listen to any one of you anymore. You don't understand anything. You have no eyes and no ears that are anymore good than stopped ones."

"Let's not have a tantrum now," Nursie said, interrupting him. "Why Baby needs his nap. My goodness, no wonder. It's way past the time." She reached out to him.

Fighting wouldn't do any good. He could never hurt her, never dent her, in her mind nor in her body. He was still nothing to her even when he fought, but now he fought. He bit at the soft arms and kicked at her treads, bruising his feet, and he began to laugh an odd, sobbing laugh. The fighting was silly and the laughter shook him so that it was only weak fighting anyway. "You can't even see me.

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You never have. Never, never."

She was carrying him slowly, but easily, up the wide low stairway, and she was talking, gently soothing. "You must learn to be a *good* boy, and not fight. You know, there's an enemy, a barbarous enemy, far away, and we, the robots, protect the city for all the peace-loving peoples of the world, for this city is more than just a place for people to live and work. It stands for a way of life. It is a haven of civilized living and we must keep it safe."

He'd heard all this before.

Tall wide-leaved plants, rooted at the foot of the stairs, brushed at them as they rose. Baby tore off a whole branch with one violent sweep of his arm.

"No, no," Nursie said. "Mustn't touch." This made Baby laugh louder and more, though he didn't know why, and the laughing hurt his stomach, but he couldn't stop.

They crossed the balcony, Nursie swaying a little with Baby's tossing weight. The door of the nursery slid open as it always did instantly for Nursie, but never for anyone else, not even Baby, though it would have opened for Mommy and Daddy.

They were there, in his bright special room, circular, windowed top to bottom, with a blue ceiling where stars winked on and off. A room specially planned by a loving mother and father for a son named Christopher John.

Nursie put him gently into his bed and shut the gate. "You'll feel much better after your nap," she said. "*Then* you'll be my good boy again and we'll play in the sandpile at the park if you like."

Baby doubled up with painful laughter. Why was everything so funny now?

She left and the gay red door slid shut after her, shut to stay, until she came back.

The bed was youth-size. Baby lay, knees drawn up, laughing and holding his stomach. Gradually the laughter stopped and it was like after crying, leaving him empty and looking at his starred ceiling.

Later he put his feet tight against the bottom of the bed and braced his hands at the top. "This is not even my bed," he said out loud. "It's too small." And he pushed until the wood panel broke and his feet came through and he lay out straight. "I'm me," he said. "They can't see me, but I am me, and quite big."

He got up and stepped over the side of the bed. He went to the section of the wall with movable panels. He had broken the levers long before, on that moonlight night of the first escape when he was half the size he was now. House had not registered it even then so no one came to fix it. He slid the glass panel to the side, letting the hot outside air come in. He grinned again, pulling his lips back from his teeth, a dog grin, or wolf.

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He stepped out on the thin wire frame that held the patio roof. "Please," he said, but there was a downturning of his voice, half mockery, yet not quite sure. He ran out on the frame, tightrope style, sure-footed, jumped at the end and landed rolling in the grass beyond the gray-and-orange circle of the patio. There was no one in sight.

"Good Please?" He loped across the back, leaped the dried-up stony bed where the imitation stream used to run, pumped in a rambling circle about the back yard. He climbed the carefully random rocks at the far end and jumped a retaining wall to the footwalk below.

The sub-belt entrance, a stone lean-to at the corner park, was a 200-yard sprint. Baby ran down the slow-moving ramp into the bright white-tiled tunnel and at the bottom stepped easily from the slower belts to the fastest. But even there he kept running along the moving aisle past the line of seats.

This was not a time for sitting. Now he was going farther and faster than ever before, and never coming back. He went at an easy run, hands low, relaxed, head tipped back. He looked ahead down the long bright tunnel, empty and bare as far as he could see—but then everywhere he had ever looked had been empty and bare except for occasional robots.

He ran until, even in this cool place, the sweat dripped down from under his arms. He felt the dampness between his shoulder blades and on his upper lip and he smelled himself, a sticky, unrobot smell, bitter and sweet. After a while he tired and sprawled, knees spread wide, in one of the hard molded chairs at the side.

A long time had passed, he knew. Usually he was impatient with the sub-belt. He had never been able to stay underground more than about an hour without coming up to take a look, but this time he had the patience to stay. The running had eased the turmoil but something still smoldered inside him and now he had a new kind of patience.

He lay back, eyes half shut, not moving, hypnotized by the long white way before him and the humming movement. Hours were nothing to him now.

It was hunger, finally, that woke him to reality again, but still he didn't go up outside. He began a series of belt-changings, branching off at random but staying on the fast lanes. His stomach growled and he knew that even leaving the belts was no insurance of a meal. He would have to hunt and sneak and hide from overseers or wild dogs. But it this was to be forever, a change for keeps, it had to be far and devious, and so he stayed.

Much later he took the slower lanes to the slowest and then to a rising ramp.

He came out on a wide-walled footwalk. The summer sun was low

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and red, and Baby stood, watching it. He could almost see it move past the tree tops. He whispered nothing, but he felt the feeling he used to feel when he said Please and it was important, the same feeling when Rob 6 asked Central and Central used to answer and was always right.

He stared at the sun, thinking, this will be the place, Sun. Here I will be me and robots will not tell me what to do and I won't belong to any house or any overseer.

He walked across the grassy tree-lined footwalk to the smooth gray wall. It was half again as tall as he was and had not the slightest hand hold. Baby bent his knees low, jumped from a stand, and grasped the top with both hands. He swung his left foot up, curled the toes over the top and then pulled himself up. Resting on elbows and one knee, he looked down into the garden, a richer, larger garden than he had ever seen before. He felt an exhilarating excitement for this looked like something really new and different.

He rolled gently over the wall and landed on hands and knees in the grass. He stood up and walked boldly down the neatly kept path that led away from the wall. He didn't hide or watch for overseers. Whatever would happen, he felt, would be different here in this different place, and he went eagerly forward to meet whatever would come.

He passed rows of thick hedges, then a group of tall, pungent-smelling pinetrees. He rounded a bank of white-flowered bushes and there, before him, surrounded by cut hedges like the walls of a room, was a fountain and a statue.

The pool was edged with natural-looking rocks and on the largest rock in the center was a figure of stone about his own size.

Baby laughed out loud then, splashed through the clear cold water and climbed up the slippery rock to stand just below the figure. He had seen others, oddly shaped like this, in parks and downtown sections sometimes: the rounded body, looking strangely lumpy top and bottom, with a thin waist in the center. He knew the names that went with this shape were woman, girl and lady.

This figure held the head of a serpent. The long snake body crossed the waist just under one of the pointed chest-lumps. The snake's mouth was wide, and inside there was the tiny pipe where the water of the fountain came flowing.

Baby stooped and drank from the serpent's mouth, and then looked up and it seemed as if the statue's bent head and half-closed eyes looked at him with a steady gaze, and there was something there that was not like a robot. Something that made him sad.

He reached up and ran his fingers down the soft curve of the

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cheek, so soft-looking but so hard to the touch. He touched the nose and then his own nose. This is a little baby too, he thought, smaller than I am. He went round to the back. He laughed because the hair hung down so far from the head. He ran his hand from under the arm, inward to the waist and down over the hips and he laughed again because his own shape was right and this shape was a joke.

Then he remembered how hot it was and how cool the water below felt on his legs. It was a shallow pool. The water came only just above his knees, but he climbed down and lay full length in it, splashing and blowing and putting his head in all the way.

He sat up, wiping the water from his face with the palms of his hands, and there, in the path before him, it seemed as if the statue had come to life, colored a rosy tan. It was all there, but different from the stone: damply curling tan-brown hair, the darker etched eyebrows, tan-brown eyes, lips lightly red and also the tips of the two round shapes at the chest.

Soft, it was, but it stood like the statue, and he, half rising on one knee, stood like a statue too. He stared a long time, not moving, afraid almost to breath even, and the other stared back. Then he stood up slowly, so slowly, as if a strange mad dog or wild cat was before him. The only sound was the water dripping from his body, but that lasted only a few moments and again they stood and stared. Then Baby moved again, stepping slowly forward this time. He was not afraid. This creature was smaller than he was and looked so vulnerable.

The creature took a step back then, and Baby took a faster step forward. Then the thing turned and ran, but Baby caught it easily in two leaps and they fell together, one warm soft body against another. This contact shocked them. They drew apart quickly, stilled again like statues, and they stared silently. Then slowly Baby touched a finger to the creature's chest. The wonder of the feel made him draw his hand away again, but slowly this time. "Soft," he said in a whisper, "Soft and warm," and then he touched his own chest. "I too."

The other stared silently a moment and then asked suddenly, also in a whisper, "Are you . . . human?"

Baby grasped the creature's upper arm then, shaking it boldly but lightly back and forth. "You feel good," he said. "Strange, but good."

"I'm human," it said then.

"So am I. I'm Baby."

"I'm Honey."

"I came to find a new thing and I found you."

"They all say there are no humans left."

"Rob 6 and Nursie are wrong, and so are all the others, and now there's you. I'm glad I ran away

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from them and came here. Why is your hair so long?"

"It just is."

"And you're shaped all wrong."

"It's you that's wrong. This is the way I am. Like the statue is the way to be and that's my way."

"I know. You're woman. You look funny, but you feel nice." He cupped the other's chin in his palm. He ran his fingers over the lips and then down across the neck and lower even, to the pink, soft tip of the round shape at the chest. She drew away. "You tickle," she said.

"I like human beings," Baby said, "better than Nursie or Rob 6 or dogs and cats. I didn't think I would, but I do."

"I think I do too."

They both stiffened at the sound of a distant voice. "Honey, Honey. Where are you? It's almost time for bed."

They stared at each other but they didn't move to go.

The Nursie came nearer. Baby could hear the wheeze and scratch. When she rounded the corner, finally, she looked exactly like his own Nursie, but he could tell, absolutely, it wasn't Nurse 16.

She reached quickly and drew Honey away from him. "What are you doing here?" she asked. "This is private property."

Without thinking, Baby gave the information he always gave, the way Nursie had taught him. "I'm Baby number 2, family PR 1-54-238, overseer Rob 1026. I live in Forest Knolls, and I came here and found this human being."

"How did you get in?"

"I climbed the wall."

"Those wall guards, they just don't work anymore." She stood motionless and Baby knew she was calling some other rob. He looked at the human being again, fascinated with the curiously shaped body, drawn by its softness and vulnerability, and he waited, staring at it, and it stared too, back at him. He could see its eyes move, tracing the contours of his body. In a few minutes the overseer came.

"Trespasser," the Nursie said. "Male too. I do hope nothing happened. 2, PR 1-54-238, 0-1026. And we must do something about the wall guards. Poor Honey must be protected from this sort of thing."

The robot made a quick examination. "Nothing happened," he said. "There's been no trespasser for eighteen years and four months now." He took Baby firmly, rounding each wrist with an all-purpose pincer hand and led him away.

Baby went quietly, too dazed to think. He kept his head turned back, watching the creature called Honey until they rounded a corner.

The robot took him to a rambling house, all glass and vines and stone. The wall lifted on a small corner room. The overseer pushed Baby in and the wall came down again. There was a white marble table, and large plants growing beside it from a dirt section in the

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floor, and there were three long low green lounge chairs. Baby lay back in one. He was filled with silent wonder. Eyes wide, he watched the twilight fade outside, lights come in other parts of the house, and curtains close.

Later the overseer brought cold unsour milk and a plate with the meat cooked just right. Baby ate and drank squatting on the floor beside the low table, spilling gravy across it as he lifted the meat in his hands. It was the best meal he'd had in a long time, but now he didn't notice the taste or care about it.

After he ate he walked about the room like a caged animal. The lights went out in the other parts of the house. Baby pounded his fists against the glass walls and gave a shout, but the walls of the little room held the sound in tight, he knew, and he gave only one call.

He stood, nose against the glass, and after a while, in the dark, the creature came and the wall lifted for it and slid shut after it.

Baby's impatience left the moment it came in.

He touched its hand, but he did not speak and neither did the creature. Softness, warmth . . . there was something here that was the answer to everything.

What was the answer?

He pulled at the creature roughly then, and it sucked in its breath and pulled away, and he let go. What *was* the answer? It was tantalizing, close, and yet . . .

He touched the creature's hair gently, and it didn't move away this time. He felt full of gentleness and of violence too, and he held himself tight, tensing his muscles against themselves.

They sat down together on the edge of one of the lounge chairs. They touched each other and they watched each other smile in the dim light of the rising half moon.

The answer was close . . . closer . . . and yet so far. Not to know and to be so close was worse than the howling and the running in moonlit streets. Much worse.

He grabbed the other, shaking it, squeezing the answer out with all his violent pent-up strength. Answer! But it only cried out in pain and then made a sobbing sound. And when he loosed his grip a bit because of the sounds it made, it pulled away and the panel was open and shut again before he realized it and the creature was gone.

When Rob 6 came in the early morning to take the lost boy home, the marble table was broken, the plants were trampled. The foam from inside the three lounges was strewn about the room. Baby had a scratch across his cheek, black-and-blue marks on his legs, and bloody knuckles, but he went quietly, wrist cuffed in Rob 6's two metal fingers.

At home Nursie bathed him and put him in his room. "I wish you would try to be good," she said. "I wish you would just try."

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He slept heavily for a short while, then climbed out the window and took the same sub-belt.

He tried to remember the time it took, and the changes. Once he came out at an edge of the great city where the towers of the barrier wall stretched giant pointing fingers that sent invisible currents arcing across the city to protect it from an enemy that never came anymore.

At night he took the belt that led home to Forest Knolls. His eyes were slits now, his mouth a firm line. There would be no more fits of running in the empty streets, or wild howling, or climbing. Instead, this crease between the eyes.

He searched the next day, and the next, and the next . . .

The important thing, the answer to everything, was somewhere there in the vast, decaying city, an answer to the robots and to the decay, to the city and the world and most of all to him, but it was . . . *lost.*

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As a versifier, Isaac Asimov has to date expressed himself only in familiar patterns, usually adroit pastiches of forms created by W. S. Gilbert. Now the maddening insistence of the question most frequently asked every author drives him to shape something of his own (if with certain tintinnabulatory echoes of E. A. Poe)—a brand new Asimoverse form:

I Just Make Them Up, See!

by ISAAC ASIMOV

Oh, Dr. A—
Oh, Dr. A—
There is something (don't go 'way)
That I'd like to hear you say.
Though I'd rather die
Than try
To pry,
The fact, you'll find,
Is that my mind
Has evolved the jackpot question
for today.

I intend no cheap derision,
So please answer with decision,
And, discarding all your petty cautious fears,
Tell the secret of your vision!
How on earth
Do you give birth
To those crazy and impossible ideas?

Is it indigestion
And a question
Of the nightmare that results?
Of your eyeballs whirling,
Twirling,
Fingers curling
And unfurling,
While your blood beats maddened chimes
As it keeps impassioned times
With your thick, uneven pulse?

Is it *that,* you think, or liquor
That brings on the wildness quicker?
For a teeny
Weeny
Dry martini
May be just your private genie;
Or perhaps those Tom and Jerries
You will find the very
Berries
For inducing
And unloosing

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This weird gimmick or that kicker;
Or an awful
Combination
Of unlawful
Stimulation,
Marijuana plus tequila,
That will give you just that feel o'
Things a-clicking
And unsticking
As you start your cerebration
To the crazy syncopation
Of a brain a-tocking-ticking.

Surely *something*, Dr. A.
Makes you fey
And quite outré.

Since I read you with devotion,
Won't you give me just a notion
Of that shrewdly pepped-up potion
Out of which emerge your plots?
That wild secret bubbly mixture
That has made you such a fixture
In most favored s. f. spots—

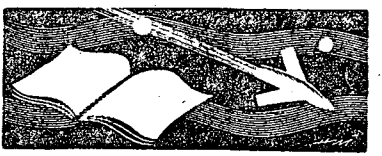
Now, Dr. A,
Don't go away—

Oh, Dr. A.—

Oh, Dr. A.—

[*A. goes away.*

SOME OF OUR BEST FRIENDS . . . ARE



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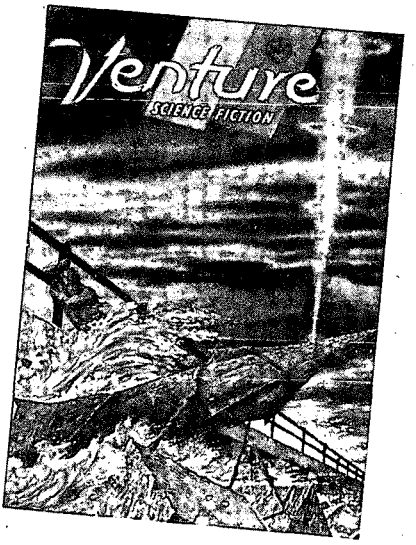
THE GAME OF GLORY . . .



That's what adventure is. It may not always seem so to the adventurer, – when he's lost and alone . . . when he is attacked overwhelmingly by men or space or his own faltering spirit. But glory is there as long as man ventures forth in search of new experiences to test the strength of his mind and body . . .

THE GAME OF GLORY is also the title of the moving, actionful novelet by Poul Anderson in the March issue of Venture Science Fiction, now on sale. Which is fitting, because strong, fine stories of adventure are what Venture particularly features . . .

In the same issue there is a story by Algis Budrys, "The Edge of the Sea," which tells of the enduring, unquenchable spirit of a man fighting a hurricane on the Florida Keys, and fighting on even when something from space joins against him.

Also: Isaac Asimov contributes an article on the atmosphere of the Moon – and reports how important that atmosphere may be to the first rockets we send there; Theodore Sturgeon, in his column, discusses a fascinating book, of some considerable importance to the field, which doesn't exist – yet; and Robert Silverberg reports on the unusual case of "Eve and the Twenty-Three Adams." In addition, there are other stories by old hands and newcomers.

In short, if the game of glory appeals to you, if first class adventure is something you're looking for, you will be making a shrewd investment if you pick up a copy of Venture Science Fiction.

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